

THE FUTURE OF CINEMA

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George Miller, Sofia Coppola, Fede Alvarez and many more on Hollywood's hot-button topics

DECEMBER
2024

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THE GALAXY
GOES
GOONIES

ROBERT PATTINSON and ROBERT PATTINSON head up

MICKEY 17

INSIDE BONG JOON HO'S BONKERS SCI-FI EPIC



Plus

THE LORD OF THE RINGS
FIRST WORD ON
THE HUNT FOR GOLLUM

DUNE: PROPHECY
PREPARE FOR SCHEMING
AND SANDWORMS

MUFASA: THE LION KING
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"Who's Kelly Brimble?"

EMPIRE WELCOME

"DIFFICULT TO SEE. Always in motion is the future," said a certain wrinkly green bog-dweller in *The Empire Strikes Back*. As always, Yoda had a point. Not least when it comes to the movie industry — the last few years have seen Hollywood roiled by one seismic change after another, from the rise of Netflix and subsequent streamers, to studio takeovers, to the recent AI boom. It's been head-spinning, for filmmakers and film fans alike. Now, in late 2024, things look uncertain, even scary, for cinema.

But as another *Star Wars* character (played by an actor brought back to life by cutting-edge VFX) said in *Rogue One*: there's hope. New technology means new opportunities, and there's exciting talent everywhere you look, with this year having seen the release of one vital, boundary-pushing vision after another (for my money, the existence of *Hundreds Of Beavers*, *Anora* and *Nickel Boys* alone is proof enough that cinema is in rude health). And so we decided the time was right to canvass experts — some of our favourite filmmakers from across the globe, makers of both blockbusters and indie movies — to ask for their thoughts on the state of the industry. Their answers, from page 54, make for frank, fascinating reading.

Speaking of the future, our cover story journeys to the year 2054, where a hapless astronaut is finding that immortality ain't all it's cracked up to be. *Mickey 17* is the return of Bong Joon Ho after his Oscars glory of 2020, and John Nugent gets the lowdown from the legendary director — plus star Robert Pattinson and more — on why space was his



final frontier. If you thought *Snowpiercer* was wild, well, buckle up.

Also in this issue: we assemble the A-list directors behind new *Star Wars* show *Skeleton Crew*, learn what's next for Middle-earth, talk dogs with Amy Adams, and find out why Danny Dyer is building a tiny library. Really.

Always in motion is the future. Bring it on.



Nick
NICK DE SEMLYEN
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This month's exclusive subscriber cover
by Supertotto

Artist, illustrator, motion and graphic designer Totto Renna — also known as Supertotto — lives and works in Naples and Berlin. See more of his work at supertotto.com

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION

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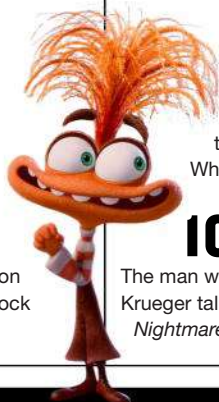
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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH



JOHN NUGENT SPOKE TO BONG JOON HO FOR OUR COVER STORY

"I spent a delightful hour on Zoom with Director Bong. It was his first interview for *Mickey 17* and he was on smashing form — talking about human cloning, inventing a fictional Robert Pattinson twin brother, and a little bit of magic he likes to call 'Bong sauce'."



CHRIS LUPTON OVERSAW OUR CYNTHIA ERIVO PHOTOSHOOT

"It was a joy to go to New York for our shoot with Cynthia Erivo, by legendary Hollywood photographer Mark Seliger (above, left). She was so collaborative and open — happy to get the perfect shot, and we had a shared passion for early-'90s fashion editorial. A dream shoot!"



JAMES DYER CO-HOSTED A LORD OF THE RINGS SCREENING AND PODCAST

"There are few things more delightful than nerding out with the cast and creators of *The Rings Of Power*, and that's just what we did at a special screening of the Season 2 finale. The audience of *Empire* readers included an Elf and some Harfoots (above with Gandalf himself, Daniel Weyman)."

Nick de Semlyen, Imago, Mark Seliger Studio. Spine lines issue 433: Newsstand: "You think everything's like Terminator." "Cause everything is like Terminator!" is from *Hot Tub Time Machine 2*. Subs: "Oh, Switcher..." Terminator — lunch time! GET HIM! "Nice dog" is from *Mannequin*

"A STUNNING, CINEMATIC MASTERPIECE"

AWARDS RADAR



ROBBIE COLLIN, THE TELEGRAPH



PETER BRADSHAW, THE GUARDIAN



ED POTTOR, THE TIMES

"A VIBRANT AND HILARIOUS
TALE OF HUSTLING"

ED POTTOR, THE TIMES

"A TERRIFIC PERFORMANCE
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*Mikey
Madison is*

Alma

A made in America
love story by *Sean Baker*

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WRITTEN AND
DIRECTED BY SEAN BAKER
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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH



HAKUNA MATATA

I'm just reading your new issue in bed this evening and I couldn't believe you missed out *The Lion King* from your top films of 2004 ['The Ranking', issue #430]! I understand it didn't make the top ten (11 in this case), but to not even give it a mention! I cannot feel the love tonight!

RACHEL WHITE, VIA EMAIL

OMG. Sleep-deprived mom here. *Lion King* was 1994, not 2004. Please don't judge me; hopefully you haven't even read these messages.

RACHEL WHITE, "VERY EMBARRASSED MOTHER OF A 13-MONTH-OLD", VIA EMAIL

Rachel, this realisation made us all smile. Have a much-deserved Picturehouse membership on us. In the meantime: they say the lion sleeps tonight — let's hope you do too.

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership

comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.



ON THE RINGS OF POWER EPISODE 7'S METAL FINALE:

What an episode. The end-credit music was what I imagine Orcs would listen to on their headphones before battle.

ROBERT WRIGHT

CAN'T STOP THE MUSIC

Re: *Speak No Evil*. James McAvoy has ruined The Bangles' 'Eternal Flame' for me! Any other readers had a song sullied by a film?

SARAH SPEIR, VIA EMAIL

What say you, readers? Personally, we can no longer listen to 'Stuck In The Middle With You' without thinking of Reservoir Dogs' ear surgery.



I have to ask if it was deliberate for you to have reviews for *The Penguin*, *Cuckoo* and *The Crow* all on the same page? Shame Michael Flatley's *Blackbird* came out two years ago.

@TRICKYVB

THE HAN-KING

Not even a mention for *Hancock* in the Will Smith ranking ['The Ranking', issue #433]? The first half, well, okay, third, of that film is a masterful act of super-anti-hero narrative force. And yes, the subsequent storyline is contrived, and yes, it fails after that on a number of levels, and actually now I come to think about it, I can't remember how it ends. But the trailer was good? As you were.

JOHN PARKIN, VIA EMAIL

The narrative arc of this email, John, was far more compelling than anything in Hancock.

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
AFTER ROBBIE WILLIAMS AS A CG-MONKEY, WHAT ANIMAL-LED BIOPIC DO YOU WANT TO SEE?



A Lewis Hamilton biopic with a CGI turtle/tortoise.

@JESSSCHLTN

Is it too obvious to suggest Barry White as a walrus?

@TIMIREDALE1978

The *Monty Python* story, featuring a giraffe (Cleese), a gopher (Chapman), an owl (Palin), a donkey (Idle), a fox (Jones), and a sloth (Gilliam).

@W_SCHWANEBECK

Seal as a seal. So we get 'Kiss From A Rose', sung by a seal.

@MATTALL70333850

The Beatles played by beetles.

@PHILIPSLATTERY

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR X ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

ROBERT PATTINSON SPEAKS TO EMPIRE NOVEMBER 2009

THE BRITISH A-LISTER is our latest (double) cover star — but it's not the first time he's graced our pages. We spoke to him in 2008, just as the *Twilight* juggernaut was about to kick off ("Edward is a 108-year-old virgin, so he's obviously got issues," Pattinson admitted to us). And by the time we caught up with him the following year, for sequel *New Moon*, the then-23-year-old was a bona fide megastar.

Our correspondent met him

on the beach at Cannes, finding Pattinson baffled and bemused by his new-found fame; on a nearby promenade, hordes of screaming teenage girls were desperately vying for a glimpse of their new vampiric hero. "This is really bizarre," Pattinson confided. "Especially when I haven't even seen the movie yet." Read our latest interview with Pattinson from page 46 — thankfully, this time he has seen the film.



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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

DECEMBER 2024 | EDITED BY BETH WEBB

A new age for Middle-earth

THE LORD OF THE RINGS IS EXPANDING, WITH NEW ANIME
THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM AND MORE. SERIES STALWART
PHILIPPA BOYENS FILLS US IN

WORDS DAN JOLIN

ALMOST 25 YEARS after Peter Jackson's original trilogy of films, *The Lord Of The Rings* is having a major resurgence. In the wake of *The Rings Of Power*'s second season, Kenji Kamiyama (*Blade Runner: Black Lotus*) releases his Tolkien anime adaptation *The War Of The Rohirrim*. Then there are two new live-action instalments incoming, including a Gollum adventure to be directed by franchise veteran Andy Serkis. Speaking with *Empire*, another long-standing *LOTR* linchpin — writer-producer Philippa Boyens — discusses these upcoming sagas.

How does it feel to be back in Middle-earth with *The War Of The Rohirrim*?

It's been a really nice entry back to the world. I worked a lot with the writers, but it's been nice to pass it into the hands of the next generation. It was also incredibly exciting to work with Kenji Kamiyama, who is such a visual master. That made things a lot easier. I got to

see it through the eyes of a producer, running around and being bossy!

How does the live-action world that you helped to create blend with the look of anime?

It blends beautifully. I felt this story would work in anime, and that Rohirric culture would sit really naturally within that world, and it has in fact done that. There's a sort of starkness to Helm's Deep, for example, which really works in anime. It also feels older than the live-action films. It feels very much like that difference between, say, the times of Alfred the Great and William the Conqueror, to give it a historical context.

Why this particular story? Why focus on Helm Hammerhand and this relatively local conflict in Rohan, 200 years before *The Fellowship Of The Ring*?

We didn't want our first foray back to draw heavily upon the characters established in the live-action

films. We wanted a self-contained story. And we didn't want that story to be about rings or dark lords. So once we understood that, Helm [voiced by Brian Cox] swam into view quite quickly. His is an interior story set against this epic struggle within the boundaries of one country.

Looking back almost 25 years, when did it become clear to you that *The Lord Of The Rings* was a cinematic phenomenon?

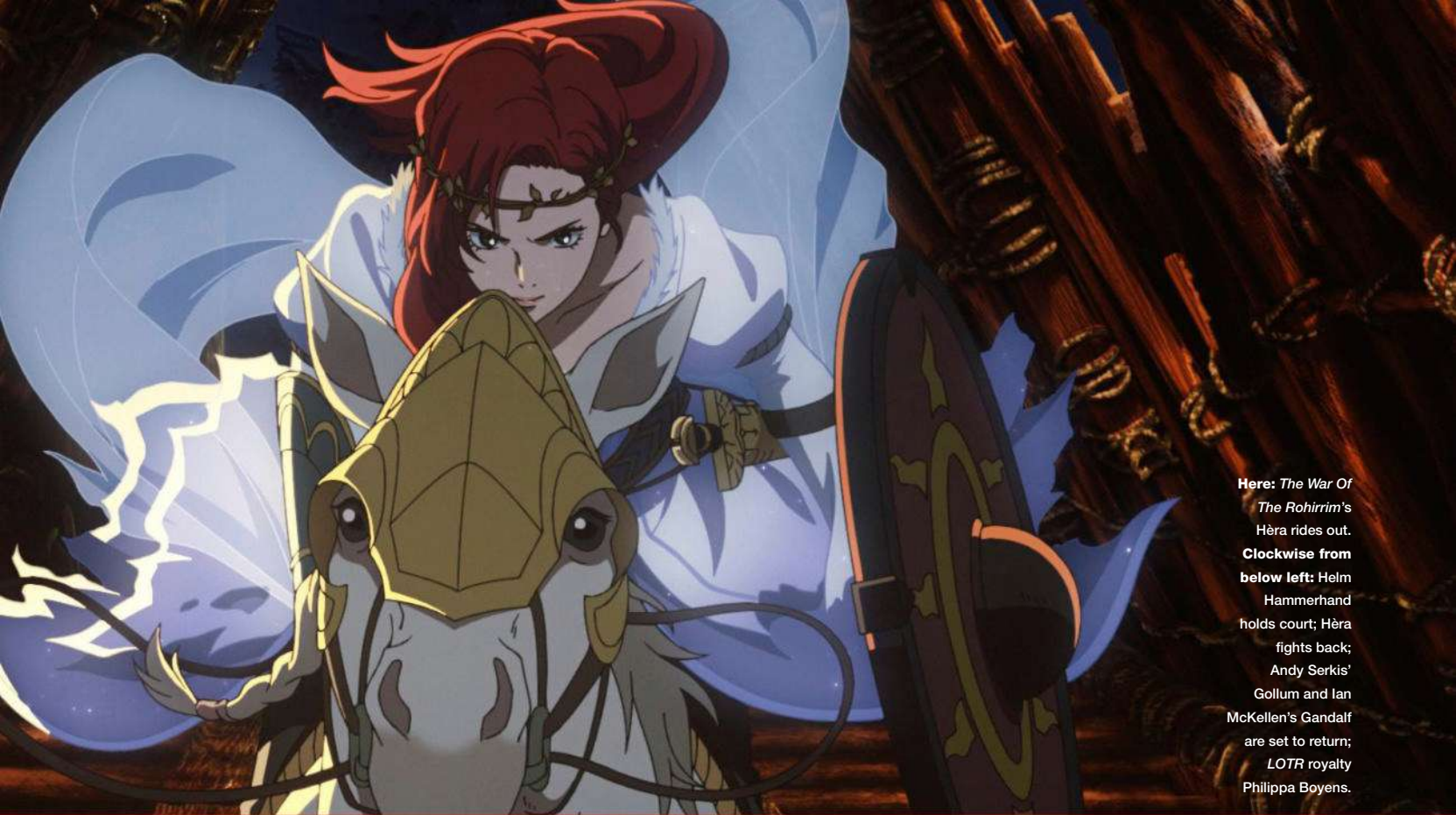
The first time I thought, "Wow, this could be something," was when I saw the excitement among the journalists at that very first screening of the Mines of Moria sequence at Cannes 2000. But, honestly, it took a while for it to settle in after *Fellowship*. The real test — actually for the *Hobbit* trilogy as well — has been seeing how it's still relevant to younger people. It's still playing.

The journey is continuing in live-action, too, with *The Hunt For*

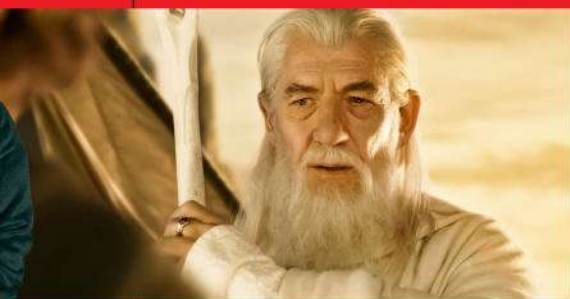


Alamy, Getty Images





Here: *The War Of The Rohirrim's* Héra rides out. **Clockwise from below left:** Helm Hammerhand holds court; Héra fights back; Andy Serkis' Gollum and Ian McKellen's Gandalf are set to return; *LOTR* royalty Philippa Boyens.



Gollum. Can you address Ian McKellen's claim that it will be two films?

I can tell you definitively it isn't two films! That was a genuine misunderstanding that happened because we've begun to work, conceptually, on two different live-action films. The first being *The Hunt For Gollum*, the second one still to be confirmed. We're playing around with a number of ideas, but most of those ideas do include Gandalf. So Gandalf would potentially return for two live-action films. We're not splitting *Gollum* into two films at all. It's quite an intense story, which falls after the birthday party of Bilbo and before the Mines Of Moria. It's a specific chunk of incredible untold story, told through the perspective of this incredible creature.

Is it good to be reunited with Andy Serkis, who is both directing and playing Gollum again?

Yeah, he's literally one of my favourite human beings on the whole planet. Strange that he can so easily slip into that demented brain.

Will there be further animated tales?

If *War Of The Rohirrim* does well, we have an absolute banger of a second film that would just be incredible as an anime. But let's see if there's an appetite for it.

Finally, have you been watching *The Rings Of Power*?

I haven't watched it, and I've done that quite deliberately because I'm not about to pass judgement on anybody else's attempt to go back into that world. It's a very complex world, and it's hard to tell it really well. But the real reason to stay away is because we don't want any cross-contamination. I don't want to feel that it has influenced our storytelling. Though I want them to do a brilliant job, and I think it's a fantastic idea. Hopefully one day I will watch it. I just need to get my own arse out of Middle-earth first!

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM IS IN CINEMAS FROM 13 DECEMBER

A castle fit for a vampire

ROBERT EGGERS TELLS US HOW HE MADE THE TITULAR FIEND OF NOSFERATU FEEL AT HOME

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

AS SOON AS Nicholas Hoult's real-estate agent Thomas Hutter begins his approach to Nosferatu's gothic manor in the new film of the same name, things go south. In Robert Eggers' take on FW. Murnau's 1922 horror classic, Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård) seems like evil incarnate — and Eggers ensured the bloodsucker's surroundings were suitably diabolic. Here, the director talks us through the character's unwelcoming environs.

THE CASTLE

Nestled on the top of a wretched hill in the Carpathian Mountains, its spires stabbing the sky, the grand old pile in Eggers' film is, in fact, Transylvania's Hunedoara Castle (aka Corvin Castle). Even if the action itself — anything involving human beings or vampires — wasn't filmed there. "We wanted to shoot Transylvania for Transylvania, but at the end, it wasn't financially feasible," says Eggers. "So we shot some plates. Most of Transylvania [in the film] is the Czech Republic, but the most epic landscapes are actually Transylvania, including that castle." The crew did, though, have to apply some cinematic wear-and-tear. "They'd been restoring Hunedoara Castle, so we needed to de-age it for the movie. It was looking too good."

THE COURTYARD

Once Hutter gets to Orlok's digs, a different castle was utilised. "The gatehouse and the



courtyard, that is Pernštejn Castle in the Czech Republic," says Eggers — who, when he first scouted it, didn't realise that it had been on screen before. "It was actually used as the castle for Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu* [1979], but I'd been consciously not watching that film, so it didn't occur to me." He then skimmed through his predecessor's version, and realised that the

parts he liked had not been filmed. "So we were able to use the Herzog castle without using the Herzog castle, which was kind of awesome." Then there are the doors themselves, towering over Hutter like the gates of hell. They were built for Eggers' film, and are enormous — as he admits, "larger than any castle doors I've ever seen in real life. Certainly

THE PLATFORM

“Sexually liberated middle-aged women are getting their happy ending”



BETH WEBB CELEBRATES THE YEAR OF THE MOMS WHO LIKE TO...

MILFS KINDLY TAKE a back seat; 2024 is the year of the MWLF. After generations of filmmakers have framed motherly characters through the male gaze — from the iconically stockinged Mrs Robinson to Jennifer Coolidge’s smouldering Stifler’s Mom in *American Pie* — women are seizing the lens. Middle-aged female characters are charging the screen with renewed sexual agency, playing characters who are at once complex, exalted and empowered.

At the forefront: Nicole Kidman, who won the Volpi Cup for Best Actress at the Venice Film Festival in September for her role as a lustful CEO in *Babygirl*. “[It’s] obviously about sex, it’s about desire, it’s about your inner thoughts, it’s about secrets, it’s about marriage, it’s about truth, power, consent,” said the actor at the festival’s press conference. The erotic drama, which filmmaker Halina Reijn made in part to address the “orgasm gap” between men and women, is the second film this year that sees Kidman get hers on screen. The first was *A Family Affair*, a light and charming Netflix comedy about a widowed author who embarks on a fling-with-promise with her daughter’s movie-star boss (Zac Efron).

It’s a striking difference from the last time the pair shared the screen together, when their sexual escapades in 2012’s scuzzy drama *The Paperboy* ended in brutal tragedy. In 2024 sexually liberated

women are getting their happy ending, and people can’t get enough of it.

For this is also the year that we’ve had *The Idea Of You*, the Anne Hathaway-fronted romance in which her 40-year-old gallery owner shacks up with a boy-band singer (Nicholas Galitzine). The film — which launched on Prime Video — garnered 50 million views in its first two weeks online, making it a streaming hit. Then there’s this month’s *Lonely Planet*, which sees Laura Dern’s wayward author (something of a trend within a trend) have her Moroccan getaway rocked by an affair with a younger man (Liam Hemsworth). And in the pipeline, Olivia Wilde will play a renowned provocateur who sweeps up Cooper Hoffman’s fresh-faced employee into her world of eroticism and power in Gregg Araki’s comeback *I Want Your Sex*.

Why now? Does it matter? The past few years have seen a pleasing uptick in robust — if predominantly white — roles for older women, be it Frances McDormand’s Oscar-winning turn in *Nomadland*, Coolidge’s sympathetic, furiously funny performance in *The White Lotus*, or Michelle Yeoh’s fist-flying return in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Hollywood is finally, gradually broadening its horizons when it comes to the age of its female stars, and it’s paying off. So why not give them the same sexual status that their male co-stars have held for decades?



much bigger than in any *Dracula* that occurs to me.” Go big or go home.

THE LAIR

Orlok’s abode boasts splendid trinkets: elaborate gothic goblets, ornate candle holders and the like. As is expected from Eggers, authenticity was paramount. “They were replicas of antique things that we found,” he says, although modifications were made. “The chests that Orlok keeps his ancient coins in, I had that a little smaller than the antique that was a reference, because I wanted it a very certain size. Because of the size of his hands and what the framing would be. And also that particular chest didn’t have a key, so we had to make a key mechanism. But it’s based on a real chest.” No corners were cut. “On each side of the fireplace there are knight statues — they’re based on statues of tombs of Transylvanian knights.” Orlok may be fictional, but realism mattered.

THE SOUND

Having housed him for God knows how many centuries, Nosferatu’s castle has almost become an extension of its inhabitant. Low bass drones and rumblings seem to seep out of its walls, to upsetting effect. “There’s a musical motif in the film, a whirring sound, that Robin Carolan, the composer, created by having a string orchestra play this weird sort of melting sound that makes you sick to your stomach,” explains Eggers. “It’s probably loudest when we’re approaching the castle and in the castle. But also Damian Volpe, the sound designer, was interested in the castle at night being connected to Orlok’s emotions — if he has emotions. You hear the wind and the fireplace flare up as he gets more inquisitive. It’s all very reactive, how he’s experiencing everything.” Prepare for sonic sickness. **ALEX GODFREY**

Clockwise from main:
The road to hell; Director Robert Eggers (left) on set; Nicholas Hoult as Thomas Hutter.

NOSFERATU IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 JANUARY



On A Role

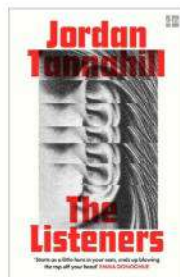
REBECCA HALL IS CLAIRE

THE ACTOR PLAYS A TEACHER
TORMENTED BY AN
INEXPLICABLE HUM IN DRAMA
SERIES **THE LISTENERS**

WORDS **HAYLEY CAMPBELL**

THE INSTINCT

Hall's popular English teacher finds her life upended when she begins to hear a hum that no-one else can hear, with no medical explanation. 'The Hum' is a real worldwide phenomenon — one in Mexico was the subject of an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries* — but Hall didn't go deep into the research of the real-life instances. She read the novel by Jordan Tannahill, on which the show is based, and his script, but didn't want to know more than her own character did. "It felt like the best way to approach it was just to bring a version of myself," she tells *Empire*. "Often it's the opposite of that — I'm hiding and doing something completely different. But because it's such an immediate, odd thing that happens to her, I thought that if I thought too much about it, I would slightly kill the vibe. I wanted to be instinctive."



Clockwise from top: A strange noise assaults teacher Claire (Rebecca Hall); With student Kyle (Ollie West); The source novel; Gena Rowlands in *A Woman Under The Influence*.

THE CLOTHES

It was during a costume fitting that Hall realised what the costume department were trying to achieve — subliminal messaging through recreation. "One of the outfits was a direct rip from *A Woman Under The Influence*, with Gena Rowlands," she says. "I was like, 'Hang on a minute!'" Other costumes, she says, were reminiscent of French New Wave director Éric Rohmer. "What was going on with the costumes made me understand, tonally, that this world that they were creating was kind of like England, but not exactly the England that I know," Hall explains. "It was this world that could exist out of time, out of place, and be representative of every

town, every woman, every teacher, and have all these cinematic references that feel uncanny but also familiar. It all adds to the weirdness."

THE HAIR

As the story progresses, it transpires that someone else *can* hear the hum — a student in her class, played by Ollie West — and the clues, again, are in the French New Wave: the hair. Not only do they dress alike, but the two actors' hair was cut to mirror each other's. "It's odd because when Ollie and I met, the first thing that sprang to mind was not, 'Wow, we have the same face.' But when you watch the show, *we have the same face!* It's conscious and deliberate, and adds to everything going on — the shared nature of their experience." The hair also helped Hall, who was blonde before production started, become Claire. "It was deliberately girlish, and that is who Claire is. There is something a tiny bit stunted about her — stuck in some youthful, adolescent place — which works when she becomes friends with her students, somewhat inappropriately."

THE HUM

The haunting hum that changes Claire's life can be heard by the viewer, but was added in the edit. On set, Hall had to imagine her own. "Sometimes it would be the sound of my heart being very frenetic, sometimes it would be naturally occurring in the environment, often it would be the film camera itself, because we were shooting on film — which is a rarity, especially in television. If you're standing close to the camera you can hear the (*mimics mechanical film noises*). And that started to be like a sort of cue. '*Rebecca, don't forget about the hum.*'" Whether Claire is ultimately picking up some good vibrations remains to be seen.

THE LISTENERS IS ON BBC ONE IN LATE NOVEMBER

CELEBRATING A MOVIE MAESTRO

NEW DOC MUSIC BY JOHN WILLIAMS SALUTES A COMPOSING LEGEND. PRODUCER RON HOWARD CUES IT UP FOR US

RON HOWARD IS currently considering one of pop-culture's biggest conundrums. Just which three John Williams scores would you take to a desert island?

"My three choices would have to be: *Schindler's List*, for its emotion and gravitas," he says, "*Raiders Of The Lost Ark* for its energy and fun, and *Star Wars*, for the uplifting effect it has on me every time I hear it."

Alongside long-time Williams collaborators Steven Spielberg and Kathleen Kennedy, Howard is behind a new Disney+ documentary, *Music By John Williams*, a portrait of the master of modern-day movie scoring. Directed by Spielberg biographer Laurent Bouzereau, it traces Williams' adventures with sharks, Jedi, aliens, archaeologists, dinosaurs and wizards, aka the soundtrack to all our lives. "We wanted to celebrate John both as an artist and an individual," says Howard. "He is far too modest to 'blow his own horn' — pun intended! — but he deserves that recognition."

Howard worked with Williams on *Far And Away*, the epic 1992 Tom Cruise-Nicole Kidman starrer about Irish immigrants navigating the new frontier of America. "My favourite memory of John is seeing the look of complete enthusiasm on his face after he had screened an early cut of our film — with no temp music, I should add," he enthuses. "He instantly understood the spirit, tone and romance of the story and committed



Clockwise from main: The master at work; *Far And Away*; Director Ron Howard; John Williams and Steven Spielberg scoring *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* in 1977.

then and there to scoring the movie."

Featuring contributions from Howard, Spielberg, Kennedy, George Lucas, J.J. Abrams and Coldplay's Chris Martin, *Music By John Williams* also provides insight into the man himself ("John is humble and gracious," observes Howard, "yet profoundly driven toward excellence"), as well as trying to account for the impact of his scores.



"His work has inspired a greater understanding that orchestral music could affect and transport an audience in a myriad of ways across multiple genres and tones," says Howard.

Williams has earned 54 Oscar nominations (the most of any living person), winning five little gold men, and his influence may well continue. If Williams scores his compadre Steven Spielberg's 2026 untitled UFO flick, picking that Desert

Island Top Three just might be that little bit harder. **IAN FREER**

MUSIC BY JOHN WILLIAMS IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 1 NOVEMBER



HOLLYWOOD GOES BRAT

CHARLI XCX'S BUZZY POP STATUS IS EXPANDING INTO MOVIE STARDOM. HERE'S WHAT SHE HAS IN STORE...

ERUPCJA

Amid painting the world acid-green this summer with her album *Brat*, pop star Charlotte 'Charli XCX' Aitchison snuck to Poland to shoot a secret movie with *Slave Play* creator Jeremy O. Harris. Named after the Polish word for "eruption", it stars XCX as Bethany, who enters into a relationship with another woman. Girl, so confusing indeed.

I WANT YOUR SEX

The plotline for Gregg Araki's first feature film in a decade could be a song from *Brat*: an exploration of the sexual politics between a famous artist (Olivia Wilde) and her younger muse (Cooper Hoffman). Oh, and there's murder. XCX recently joined the film to play an undisclosed role.

100 NIGHTS OF HERO

This queer feminist fairy tale from rising filmmaker Julia Jackman will feature young powerhouse stars Emma Corrin, Maika Monroe and Nicholas Galitzine. XCX will appear, again in a so-far undisclosed part, within the story of Cherry (Monroe), her handmaid Hero (Corrin) and their secret love affair.

OVERCOMPENSATING

Brat has garnered many vocal celebrity fans, from Kamala Harris to Kyle MacLachlan. It's fitting, then, that XCX will star with the latter in this upcoming Prime Video comedy series. MacLachlan even got to attend the *Brat* tour while shooting, a full-circle moment for the former Agent Cooper. **BETH WEBB**

Chalamet faces the music

HOW THE A-LISTER TOOK BOB DYLAN LIVE AND LOUD FOR A COMPLETE UNKNOWN

WORDS IAN FREER

FOLLOWING HIS OSCAR-WINNING Johnny Cash biopic *Walk The Line*, co-writer-director James Mangold carried over one mandate for new Bob Dylan biopic *A Complete Unknown*. “I expect my actors to play and sing live on camera,” he says simply. So, while in wide shot or seen from behind, Timothée Chalamet, who plays Dylan, could mime along to the track — but when the camera was on his face, the actor had to do the singing and guitar-strumming thing for real.

“For 90 per cent of the film, it’s a single human’s musical expression,” Mangold explains, in reference to the fact that whereas Johnny Cash played with a band, Dylan is a solo artist. “To try to do that in the default setting of musical filmmaking, where everything is pre-created and played back, is antithetical to the authenticity and live feeling you want inside the music.”

Mangold describes Chalamet’s process as “long and arduous”. *A Complete Unknown* begins with the teenage Dylan’s arrival in New York in 1961. The filmmaker confirms there are subsequently a “ton” of musical performances in the film — but, in cahoots with Chalamet, he was not looking for mechanical mimicry of Dylan’s nasal singing stylings.

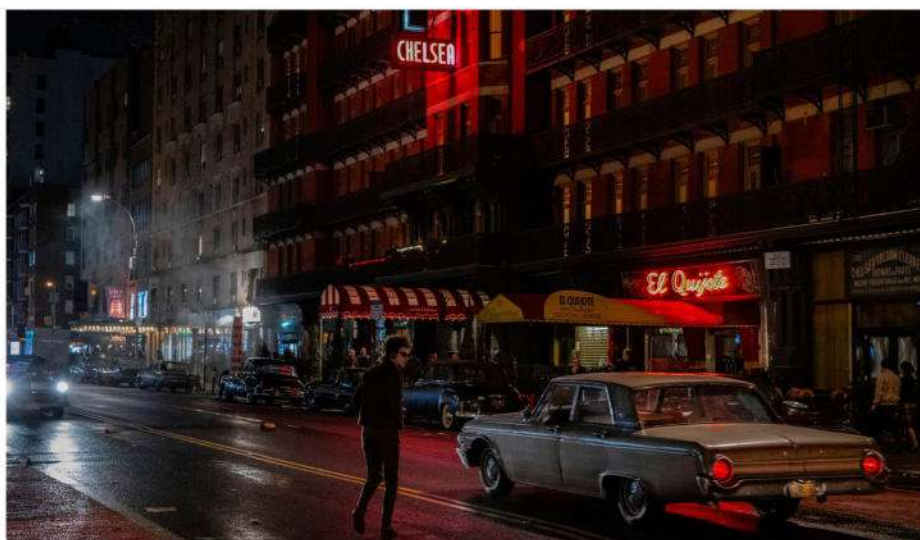
“Bob has a very specific, soulful voice, but what most defines it is his negotiation with his own words and the way he tells the story,” Mangold says. “That essence is what Timmy and I were after more than a specific mannerism or tic, per se.”

Mangold confirms that Chalamet, who couldn’t play guitar before the project started, spent three-and-a-half years learning Dylan’s songs and style. And that was just the start. “The actor has to somehow internalise all those external behaviours and own them in some way that allows them to speak through the

character,” he says. “As they’re performing, they can follow their own impulses in character and not just be doing a perfect recreation of what we’ve seen in documentary films.”

It was imperative for the director that the storytelling doesn’t stop when the characters start singing. When the time came to put the performances on film, Mangold decided “the camera should live on the shoulder with the actors on stage. You’re living with what it feels like to be them, as opposed to just recreating the concert as if you had a great seat. You’re experiencing the performance, but also the struggles underneath it. Those tensions are what my camera is trying to seek out.”

This approach plays into the film’s climactic set-piece. In 1965, acoustic poet Dylan played the Newport Folk Festival with a band and shocked the world by using — gasp! horror! — electric instruments. “It’s really exciting,” says Mangold. “It’s a kind of culmination of brewing



NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON...
COLA WARS

Clockwise from main:
Timothée Chalamet as folk rocker Bob Dylan; James Mangold directs Chalamet on set; Edward Norton plays folk singer/activist Pete Seeger; Elle Fanning hitches a ride as Sylvie Russo; Dylan outside New York's famous Chelsea Hotel.

IT'S PART OF
THE CORPORATE
BIOPIC TREND

Cola Wars arrives hot on the heels of other how-they-invented-it films loosely based on true brand-origin stories from recent American history. *Air*, Ben Affleck's take on the creation of the Air Jordan basketball shoes, was followed up by *Unfrosted*, Jerry Seinfeld's madcap reimagining of the business battle over Pop-Tarts. Consider also *BlackBerry*, *Tetris*, and Beanie Baby tale *The Beanie Bubble*, and it seems the corporate biopic is the trendiest genre in the game right now.

IT'S BASED ON A 100-
PLUS-YEAR RIVALRY

Coke and Pepsi have been battling it out for soft-drink supremacy since the late 19th century. Coke was consistently ahead of Pepsi partly thanks to its cutesy Christmas ads, but in 1975 Pepsi dealt a major blow with the 'Pepsi Challenge', a blind taste test that showed consumers preferred the taste of their drink over Coke's. Tensions bubbled up, and Coke retaliated with the launch of Diet Coke and the infamous 'New Coke', while Pepsi courted superstars for its Super Bowl ads.

JUDD APATOW IS BACK
ON THE BUBBLES

After his 2022 lockdown comedy *The Bubble*, Judd Apatow will be in the director's chair for *Cola Wars* at Sony. It

will be a dramatisation of the real-life clash between the two iconic brands, promising to tell the fizziest underdog story of all time, as Pepsi's attempts to best its long-term rival Coca-Cola escalate during the 1980s.

STEVEN SPIELBERG
IS SET TO PRODUCE

Hearing that Spielberg is behind a new war movie conjures harrowing images of battlefields, rather than boardroom scuffles over marketing mishaps. But that's exactly what the *Saving Private Ryan* and *War Horse* filmmaker is on board for, producing *Cola Wars* under his Amblin Entertainment banner and working with Apatow for the first time. No word yet on whether Steve's a Coke or Pepsi guy.

THERE'S PLENTY
OF POTENTIAL

Some wild stuff went down at the height of the Cola Wars. The film could include the 1984 incident when Michael Jackson was shooting an ad for Pepsi and a faulty pyrotechnic caused his hair to catch fire, giving him second- and third-degree burns. Or, the outrage across the US at the launch of the slightly-different-tasting New Coke, which saw groups like the 'Old Cola Drinkers Of America' sign petitions in their droves to get the old formula back. We'll just have a glass of water, thanks. **LAURA VENNING**

COLA WARS IS DUE OUT IN SUMMER 2026



conflicts and feelings that have been bubbling up through the whole movie, [which] ends with him leaving [New York], and in a sense the next transformation in his life is about to begin after the convulsion of this concert."

Mangold also points to an earlier moment when a 19-year-old Dylan performs for the dying folk legend Woody Guthrie (Scoot McNairy) and singer and activist Pete Seeger (Edward Norton) at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital. For the director, capturing the sequence became "my most singular moment" of the entire shoot. "It was in the first ten days of shooting," he recalls, "and Timmy made a choice to bend the song that was so brilliant and so embodied the spirit of Bob. I couldn't stop shooting just because I didn't want to stop watching it. I felt that he had unlocked something." It seems it wasn't just the times that were-a changin'.

A COMPLETE UNKNOWN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 JANUARY

Trailer Talk Better Man

TEAM EMPIRE WEIGH IN ON ROBBIE WILLIAMS' CHEEKY CHIMP BIOPIC

Beth Webb (News Editor): This is one of those great instances where out of nowhere you hear a one-line concept and instantly you're all in. "Robbie Williams but played by a CG chimpanzee." [1] What a bold swing.

Joanna Moran (Photography Director): I was a massive fan of Take That when I was 11 and 12. I had all their videos, I'd record them when they were on *The Big Breakfast*, so I'm excited for this.

Graham Jones (Deputy Art Director): I think that a chimp sums up Robbie Williams really well. You see him in interviews, you read about his life, and he's all about chaos. It's clever and I think it'll be a fun movie.

John Nugent (Reviews Editor): It's weird that music biopics have to have a hook now, like Pharrell Williams' *LEGO* biopic.

Beth: It's a genre that needs shaking up though; some have a habit of going too by the numbers.

John: Yes, I'd take a CG monkey over watching *Bohemian Rhapsody* any day.

Alex Godfrey (Features Editor): I've been excited about this film since I heard about it. It's really cool to see any film trying to do something different, especially when it's a haggard old genre like biopics. I think it's testament to Robbie Williams and his maverick sensibilities.

Beth: I will say he's not the first musician that I had in mind for the chimp treatment.

Alex: It's quite a mad thing to do, especially considering that he has a really mainstream audience. He's not an underground musical artist. He's a big old popstar. You've got to hand it to him.

Graham: [Director] Michael Gracey said in an interview that when he first spoke with Robbie, he asked which animal best represented him. That's where the idea came from.

John: There are images of Robbie the human here. [2] Are we going to see the chimp grow to become a human man? Are we going to see millions of years of evolution?

Beth: I wonder if this is to reintroduce him to American audiences. He's not put any



1



3



5

new music out in a long time, it feels like. But this will no doubt put him back on the map.

John: This nod to *The Greatest Showman* [3] is triggering to me because the soundtrack seemed to be played everywhere when the film came out.

Graham: Did that not inspire you, John?

John: It inspired me to go on a killing rampage.

Alex: Obviously that film was massive. But I'm sorry, "visionary director"? He's not Charlie fucking Kaufman.

Beth: Is that Take That? [4]

John: Is Gary Barlow going to be a sheep or something?

Graham: He could be an orangutan, like in *The Jungle Book*.

Beth: I appreciate that this would make more sense, but I'd much rather he be a sheep.

John: Jason Orange is a literal orange.

Joanna: Robbie's duetted with Nicole Kidman and Kylie Minogue. I hope we're going to see them in this film.

Beth: Do you think we'll see them in chimp form?

Alex: I think it would be funnier to watch chimp Robbie Williams singing with human Nicole Kidman.

Beth: She's had less well-behaved co-stars in the past, I'm sure.

Alex: Plus I think the whole point of the film is that Robbie Williams feels like a performing monkey. Even if chimps aren't monkeys.

Beth: What do we think about the visual-effects of the chimp? [5] I think they're really impressive.



2



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Admittedly he reminds me of one of the members of Gorillaz and also one of those NFT apes. But there is something endearing about him.

Alex: I think he's really funny and charming.

John: I'd heard all these reports about a CG chimp and I assumed he would be quite cartoonish. But this is like *Planet Of The Apes*.

Beth: It does add a very primal quality to everything he does. It's very stripped back, at times aggressive, sometimes he's super-vulnerable.

Graham: He's got sad eyes.

Beth: Those are Robbie Williams' eyes. Not literally. An actor called Jonno Davies did the mo-cap suit stuff, they used Robbie's voice, and then used CGI to recreate his eyes. And it's Weta FX behind it all, so, John, you weren't wrong when you said it's *Planet Of The Apes* calibre.

Joanna: This is a powerful image. [6]

Beth: It reminds me a bit of *Titanic*.

Joanna: I can imagine Leonardo DiCaprio popping up and going, "Shove over, babe."

John: I for one am looking forward to seeing more Stoke-On-Trent people on screen. We need Staffordshire representation in cinema.

Joanna: Alton Towers is up that way, isn't it?

John: Yep. It's the centre of England's pottery industry as well. A wealth of stories to be told after this one.

BETTER MAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 DECEMBER

KIERAN CULKIN'S SUCCESSION SUCCESSOR

**COMEDY-DRAMA A REAL PAIN
SEES THE ACTOR MOVE ON FROM
THE ROY FAMILY**

KIERAN CULKIN WON an Emmy this year for his role in *Succession*. Yet when *Empire* catches up with the actor, he reveals that Jesse Eisenberg, his director and co-star in family drama *A Real Pain*, had never seen him perform before. In anything. Instead, Eisenberg's sister read the script and suggested Culkín. "What a bold fucking move on his part," he reflects. "He hired somebody who he has not auditioned and whose work he has not seen. He's going on a recommendation he got from his sister and the fact I met him briefly at, like, two parties and was nice to him or something." Not only that, but Eisenberg waited a year for Culkín to finish filming *Succession*'s final season so that he could be a part of the film.

A Real Pain tells the story of two cousins, Benji and David Kaplan — Culkín and Eisenberg respectively — who tour Poland in an effort to feel closer to their family history and recently deceased grandmother. It's a powerful performance from Culkín as Benji, who is clearly undergoing a rough time. At times he can be playful — a fun hang! — morphing, without much warning, into someone much more immature and sometimes downright ornery. We all know Benji. At times we've probably all been Benji. It's an introspective, emotional role that's



Top to bottom: Benji (Kieran Culkín) takes a trip to Poland; Culkín with director and co-star Jesse Eisenberg as David.

very different from *Succession*'s Roman Roy, the youngest, most sarcastic and insecure of patriarch media tycoon Logan Roy's children.

Culkín connected with *A Real Pain* quickly, something that rarely happens with the actor. "Usually there are some things I like about it

and some things that make me very nervous and then I torture myself over the thing for months and hope it goes away," he explains. "But I read this and I was laughing out loud. 'I get this character. I know how to do this one. It seems like fun.'" What does he mean by "torture"? "There are some times where I'm seemingly right for the part, but I know I can't do justice to the thing."

The actor is adamant he had no post-*Succession* career strategy: "That may work for some, but that does not work for me." He remembers a few years ago, "Somebody used the word 'career' and I'm like, 'What? Hold on, I never once said I want to do this.'"

Maybe so, but so far Culkín's strategy of not having a strategy is certainly working out well for him. **MIKE RYAN**

A REAL PAIN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 10 JANUARY

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM EMPIRE



BILL McCONKEY



**BETH WEBB IS THINKING
ABOUT... LEGO BOMBSHELLS**

Oh, to be a fly on the wall when the likes of Kendrick Lamar, Jay-Z and Gwen Stefani learned that their interviews for what was assumed to be a live-action Pharrell Williams documentary were in fact recreated in LEGO form. Let's hope they kept the peace over *Piece By Piece*.



**SOPHIE BUTCHER IS THINKING
ABOUT... HOT ONES ALL ALONG**

I'm unsure when eating spicy chicken wings became such an integral part of press tours, but thank God it did, because it gave us deadpan icon Aubrey Plaza and theatre royalty Patti LuPone slurping and swearing their way through Hot Ones Versus on YouTube to promote *Agatha All Along*.



**NICK DE SEMLYEN IS
THINKING ABOUT...
AN SNL HORROR MOVIE**

After *Saturday Night*, I'd like to see a film about the making of a terrible episode of *Saturday Night Live*. Donald Trump dancing with people in chicken suits? Steven Seagal grappling with the concept of comedy? Pure, uncut horror.

The Spotlight Fred Hechinger

THE *GLADIATOR II* ACTOR
PAUSES TO REFLECT UPON HIS
MILE-A-MINUTE CAREER

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**



JAKE CHESSUM

"I HAVE A hard time taking a break," says Fred Hechinger. "The thought of it is nice, but by the second day..." He pulls a bored face. This is not very surprising. Hechinger does not stop. In just six years as a working actor, he has had roles in over 20 films and four TV shows. He started with Bo Burnham's raw high-school drama *Eighth Grade*, broke out with *The White Lotus*, and has racked up co-stars including Tom Hanks (*News Of The World*), Natalie Portman (*Vox Lux*), Christian Bale (*The Pale Blue Eye*), and Amy Adams (*The Woman In The Window*). He has five projects out this year alone.

"My family don't really understand it," he says of his very busy slate. "They're like, 'How have you done all this?' I have to explain, 'I don't do it all at once. And I don't have a clone.'"

He does, however, now have a twin.

At least, a pretend one. The biggest project of Hechinger's career so far is *Gladiator II*, Ridley Scott's very belated sequel. He plays Caracalla, one of a pair of twin emperors — the other, Geta, is played by Joseph Quinn — who rule Rome with a mix of ineptitude and childish entitlement. "In conversations with Ridley Scott, the influences were pretty vast," he says. "Everything from the real Caracalla and Geta (*they're very loosely based on historical figures*) to Beavis and Butt-Head, and Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten."

Caracalla would be more the Beavis and Vicious halves of their respective duos, being by some distance the less sane brother. When he's not gurning ghoulishly at bloody gladiator battles, he's consulting with his dress-wearing pet monkey, whom he considers to be a close advisor in government matters. "Her name is Sherry," says Hechinger. "And I think Sherry was more of a natural than the rest of us."

While his ascent has been speedy,



Above and right: Fred Hechinger, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in New York on 9 September 2024. **Far right:** As the frankly bonkers Caracalla in *Gladiator II*.



BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

THE SHOW
ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

"I've recently been rewatching [it] for maybe the 20th time. It's so jam-packed with jokes that every single time you watch it you're laughing at a new thing. There are about 15 jokes in every frame."

THE BOOK
DEPT. OF SPECULATION BY JENNY OFFILL

"I loved how painful it was. It left me hopeful as well, but it was not scared of [causing] pain. Her sentences are like little knives. It's like, 'What? That's such a spare and short sentence, and yet you've just destroyed my life.'"

THE ALBUM
HONEY BY SAMIA

"It's a masterpiece. It came out a while ago. I'm not even being biased — she is a dear friend, but that album is one I listen to a lot. It's just so incredible."

Hechinger has made sure to appreciate every step. "You learn from every bit of it," he says. "There are no tangents in filmmaking. Every part of the process informs another." He's been acting since he was in school and his first job came just after that, with his brief role in *Eighth Grade*. Watching Bo Burnham, until then known chiefly as a comedian, figuring out movie directing showed Hechinger that approaching work with "a level of fearlessness" could produce great results. "It was very formative," he says.

It was on the first season of *The White Lotus*, Mike White's brilliant skewering of unchecked privilege, in which Hechinger played a socially awkward teen and one of the only non-awful characters, that he realised people were actually paying attention to what he was doing. "It was the first time I would walk outside and people would want to talk to me about [something I was in]," he says. Having any level of fame is still something he's "trying to figure out", and he may have to work on that before the end of the year. As well as *Gladiator II*, he'll be appearing as comic-book villain the Chameleon in the much-delayed *Kraven The Hunter*. "His villainous power is practically being an actor," says Hechinger of the master of disguise. "It's the most meta thing I've done, probably."

Hechinger is not one to complain about his growing status. He sees that it has a massive upside. "The more you make stuff that reaches people and connects with them, the easier it gets to make more things," he says. "I always want to be taking big swings. I want to keep making things

that are entertaining and challenging at the same time." Judging by his current velocity, we won't have to wait long for them.

GLADIATOR II IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 NOVEMBER



FROM THE SUNKEN PLACE TO AN ICONIC SQUARE

HOW DANIEL KALUUYA'S *GET OUT* CHARACTER BECAME IMMORTALISED IN STATUE FORM

A NEW BUT familiar face will greet those passing through London's Leicester Square this month. Rubbing shoulders with fellow statues including Mary Poppins, Batman and a lamppost-swinging Gene Kelly is Daniel Kaluuya's *Get Out* character Chris, a new permanent fixture. Here's how the latest addition to the famous tourist spot came to be.

THE WINNING VOTE

The public was canvassed to decide upon the latest statue in the 'Scenes In The Square' initiative, asked to spotlight a young British acting talent. "We wanted to have a statue that was really contemporary and represented the present day and the future of film," explains Clare Morris, who helped to oversee the project. Kaluuya won with 20 per cent of the vote. It was a poignant moment for the actor, who took to social media to share his fondness of where "I used to eat my meal-deal prawn cocktail crisps, in between auditions."

THE PERFECT POSE

Next, the team set about choosing a definitive role and pose from Kaluuya's body of work. "*Get Out* was the role that really propelled his career and catapulted him to global stardom," Morris explains. The iconic chair shot made famous by the movie poster was an obvious choice, but after consulting Kaluuya and the filmmakers, they went with the more active option of Chris falling into the Sunken Place after being hypnotised.



Top to bottom: Seeing double — Daniel Kaluuya and his statue; The artwork in progress; Kaluuya as Chris in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017).

THE CAREFUL SCULPT

Replicating Chris' movement was challenging for the sculptors, who used images and videos to handcraft the body from clay. Kaluuya even provided a 3D scan of his face to help make Chris' expression feel authentic. "To have [an] actor that's really heavily engaged in the project — it just ends up with an even better result," says Mark Williams, who manages Scenes In The Square.

THE GRAND UNVEILING

"I feel really blessed that I can even have a piece of work that people want to watch, let alone memorialise," Kaluuya said at the launch event, adding that despite his rising Hollywood status, he remains London through and through. Which is just as well, as he can now be found permanently in the heart of London. **BETH WEBB**

Grooming: Jessica Ortiz for Jaxon Lane. Styling: Chloe Hartstein at The Wall Group. Clothing: Hermes. Trainers: Fred's own.

Joe Pepler/courtesy of DiscoverLSQ, Universal

Top to bottom:
Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor
plays Hattie; Mirror
image — Brandon
Wilson as Turner;
Ethan Herisse
as Elwood.

The POV drama that's smashing conventions

RAMELL ROSS ON NICKEL BOYS, HIS RADICAL FILM SHOT FROM ITS HEROES' POINTS OF VIEW WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

THE PHRASE “FRESH perspective” gets bandied about a lot, but new film *Nickel Boys* is taking it to the next level. Based on Colton Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2019 novel, the drama — set mostly in Jim Crow-era Tallahassee, Florida — is not only a commanding story, but is largely filmed with first-person point-of-view cameras that put us firmly in its lead characters’ heads.

The film chronicles the journey of Elwood (Ethan Herisse) and Turner (Brandon Wilson), two Black teenagers who form a friendship at the Nickel Academy, an abusive reform school in the '60s. The idea to literally tell the story from their viewpoints came courtesy of first-time feature director RaMell Ross, whose 2018 experimental documentary *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* — about the lives of the Alabama county’s inhabitants — earned him an Oscar nomination.

Ross — who also has a background in photography — had the idea for a POV film in 2013, when he took a photo of his hand in turn setting up a photo of an antebellum house on an iPhone. He called it ‘iHome’. “I was like, ‘Whoa, I don’t know if I’ve seen a more powerful gesture for authorship before, because [of] how difficult it is to make an image from the perspective of a Black person,’” he tells *Empire*. “That stuck in my head as I made *Hale County*, and then when I read Colton’s book, it all just came back.”

For Ross the process wasn’t as simple as



mounting a GoPro camera on his actors, especially when it came to their characters’ harrowing experiences. “You’re forced to think about where people look when trauma is being enacted on them, which is completely different,”

he reflects. “No-one’s looking at themselves being beat. You’re just trying to fucking survive it. And thinking about that, there’s the solution.”

One especially visceral scene shows the build-up to Elwood being whipped by one of the school’s teachers. All the dread and anger and hurt is explicitly felt without ever being shown on screen. “The second you choose *not* to show it, you realise there’s a billion other ways to do it.”

To achieve his goal, Ross and his team filmed long, unbroken takes for the entire production. And they soon realised that the authenticity lay in the imperfections. “The more perfect it is, the less it works, because human beings’ eyes are responsive — we don’t catch everything perfectly,” the filmmaker muses. “We miss almost everything. And so the biggest challenge was settling completely on the best method, because we were all learning as we [went].”

The impact of this big, stylistic swing is evident from *Nickel Boys*’ first frame, with camerawork that puts viewers squarely in the shoes of the two boys. And Ross is grateful that he got the opportunity to try something different. “It’s not easy to give a person permission to try some of the things that they let me try,” he says. “For the collaborators and the actors, there was so much play involved and so much fun that we were getting our fix in our attempt. We were getting our shot. And that’s just so joyous, because very rarely does someone really get a shot to do [their] thing.”

Focus up. Ross’ perspective demands attention.

NICKEL BOYS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 3 JANUARY



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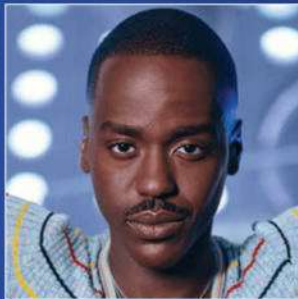
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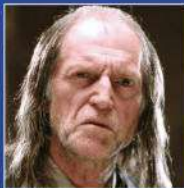
NATALIE DORMER



TOM SAVINI
FROM DUSK TIL DAWN
MACHETTE, DAWN OF T. DEAD



KATE DICKIE
LOKI, GAME OF THRONES
STAR WARS, PROMETHEUS



DAVID BRADLEY
HARRY POTTER, DR WHO
HOT FUZZ, GAME OF THRONES



ANN FIRBANK
STAR WARS, SPACE 1999
CARRY ON, THE WITCHER



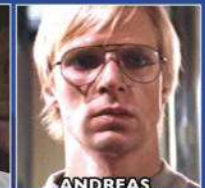
KIERAN BEW
HOUSE OF THE DRAGON
DR WHO, ALIEN VS PREDATOR



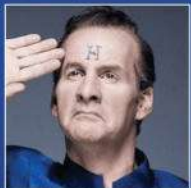
MAY CALAMAWY
MOON KNIGHT, GLADIATOR II



JULIAN GLOVER
GAME OF THRONES
INDY, STAR WARS BOND



ANDREAS WISNIEWSKI
DIE HARD, LIVING DAYLIGHTS
MISSION IMPOSSIBLE



CHRIS BARRIE
RED DWARF, BRITTAS



TOM BENNETT
HOUSE OF THE DRAGON



BLANCHE RAVALEC
MOONRAKER



DEAN-CHARLES CHAPMAN
ACOLYTE, GAME OF THRONES



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LEATHERFACE



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A cat-and-mouse game turns deadly

EMPIRE BRAVES THE SET OF SPY SHOW THE DAY OF THE JACKAL, TO WITNESS LASHANA LYNCH VS. EDDIE REDMAYNE

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

PANIC HAS FLOODED the grand foyer of Műpa Budapest, Hungary's prestigious concert hall, on a freezing January day. Hundreds of people are scattering down red-carpeted stairs and out of exits in the aftermath of an attack by the Jackal, the assassin driving a modern, serialised adaptation of Frederick Forsyth's classic espionage novel. *Empire* has a front-row seat to the chaos, and watches as the Jackal himself, a lone assassin played by Eddie Redmayne, sneaks out amid the concert-goers

in disguise. This is just one instance of the Jackal escaping MI6's clutches, much to the chagrin of Lashana Lynch's driven agent, Bianca, who is hot on his tail. "Ultimately, it's a cat-and-mouse story, with the clever cop putting herself in the shoes of this man who doesn't really exist," producer Christopher Hall explains. Speaking with *Empire* on that frosty day, Lynch and Redmayne break down their characters' respective sides of the chase.

THE CAT

WHEN IT COMES to playing an MI6 agent, *The Day Of The Jackal* is not, of course, Lynch's first rodeo. "After I shot *No Time To Die*, I said I'd never enter MI6 again," reflects the former 007. "And then this freaking script just came [along]."

Rather than the hook of the original story catching Lynch's attention, it was how multifaceted her character, Bianca, was in the script. "I was looking for a character piece, and as soon as I read it, I saw a character bursting out of the page," she says. "I was like, 'Oh man, you get to see her *live*.' You get to see her at work, her home life, she has a child. There were so many things I felt I'd be able to get my teeth into."

In fact, Lynch actively set out to move on from the iterations of her character seen in Forsyth's book and played by Michael Lonsdale in Fred Zinnemann's 1973 film adaptation. "I had to watch it from scratch, and then throw it away," she says of the film. "I love to give nods, but with me being a woman, and a Black woman, there were certain things within my experience I knew weren't in the original, and I think that's exciting." One element that remains consistent here is how skilful the



Jackal is at evading the law. For Lynch, that aspect — particularly in the sequence *Empire* witnesses — was key to getting inside Bianca's head. "The fragmented energy of the cat-and-mouse narrative is very apparent," she explains. "Especially for Bianca. She's at a time in her life where she's really reckoning with the years she's put into MI6, and

the mental energy it takes to stay determined when chasing someone who's seemingly better than her." However difficult hunting the Jackal may be, though, Bianca isn't one to give up. "She has an obsessive personality, and when there's something she can't easily crack, there's no way she's allowing someone else to crack it before her."





Clockwise from main:
Eddie Redmayne as the elusive Jackal; Hiding in plain sight; Lashana Lynch as determined MI6 agent Bianca; The Jackal mid 'costume change'; Bianca means business.



THE MOUSE

"THERE WAS A blade-through-butter quality to him," Redmayne tells *Empire* when asked about his memories of Edward Fox's Jackal in the movie. "This utter, almost balletic elegance." Fox's take was charming, ruthless, a master of disguise, and made every move in his mission to assassinate French President Charles de Gaulle look effortless. He often used old-school techniques: something that remains at the heart of this new series, despite the modern setting. "What I love about [the show] is this thrilling, very contemporary quality," says Redmayne, "but it has that analogue spycraft."

His version of the hitman is dialling that up to 11, the actor undergoing huge amounts of training to deal with the language-switching ("I worked with a German dialect coach for five months") and technical prowess required. "We've pushed it to much more of an extreme with the prosthetics," he says. "But it was really important to me that this guy was an artist as well, that he

was capable of doing these things himself. What I wanted to see, rather than the mask being pulled off, were the hours it takes to put it on."

Costume, too, plays a huge part in the Jackal staying undercover. "We've managed to shape-shift the Jackal throughout the season," costume designer Natalie Humphries says. "The first time you meet him, he's in a really deep disguise" — one that required a full body cast and extensive work with a movement coach. "Eddie changed his whole physicality," recalls Humphries. No wonder Lynch's Bianca is struggling to catch him.

Where this Jackal differentiates is in how well we eventually get to know him. "What Edward Fox does so stunningly is create a deeply magnetic and charismatic enigma," says Redmayne. "But because [the film is] two-and-a-half hours long, you don't learn anything about him. Now, over ten hours, you learn a lot. He starts in that place, and gradually cracks begin to open." There's more to this mouse, it seems, than meets the eye.

THE DAY OF THE JACKAL IS ON SKY ATLANTIC AND NOW FROM 7 NOVEMBER

Back to the future (and past, and present)

ROBERT ZEMECKIS ON HIS TIME-SPANNING, CUTTING-EDGE TALE, *HERE*

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

HE'S MADE CARS fly, Tom Hanks run (and run), and pushed the boundaries of CGI filmmaking — but with new drama *Here*, Robert Zemeckis is taking on a whole new challenge. "When I presented this idea to my longtime crew," he tells *Empire*, "they thought, 'Oh, this is going to be kind of easy.' It turned out to be maybe the most difficult thing we've ever done."

That idea was to bring Richard McGuire's unique graphic novel of the same name to the big screen, presenting a multitude of interwoven narratives throughout American history, all from one perspective. One fixed camera angle, pointed at one single spot, as it becomes home to everything from dinosaurs to early humans to a living room inhabited by one family after another. "If everything has to work within this one perspective, it's like, 'Okay, what is that perspective?'" Zemeckis explains. "'What's the height of the camera? The angle of the walls? The perfect lens?' It's endless."

But once Zemeckis had that down, the creative benefits of the camera constraints revealed themselves. "We all felt it was so

liberating to work this way," he says, recalling conversations with his cast during shooting. They didn't have to run scenes repeatedly to capture the usual coverage, and the wide framing often sees the actors' full bodies in shot. "When you have actors who have chemistry and they're fully in the same frame, it's very intimate and powerful," the director explains. "The timing of the performance is completely real. There's no false storytelling imposed on what they're doing."

Those "actors who have chemistry" are Tom Hanks and Robin Wright, who are both digitally aged up and down to play central couple Richard and Margaret across decades of their lives. With them, Zemeckis and co-writer Eric Roth on board, *Here* is a big *Forrest Gump* reunion. "When Tom signed on, the first thing I said to him was, 'We gotta ask Robin if she wants to play Margaret,'" says Zemeckis. "He said, 'That would be fantastic.' They just have this magical screen presence together."

Here has many story threads — Richard and Margaret growing up in their multi-generational house alongside Richard's parents Al (Paul Bettany) and Rose (Kelly Reilly); an inventor and his model wife in the 1920s; an aspiring aviator and his family, the house's first residents at the start of the 20th century — all of which are seamlessly threaded together. Emulating McGuire's original visuals, Zemeckis uses panels to cut out areas of the screen in one time period and fill them with another. It's a fascinating

device — but made the editing process incredibly difficult, and impossible without digital tools. "In the days of film editing, I don't know how you could even start to edit a movie like this," Zemeckis says. "I mean, there's no way."

He did look backward for inspiration though, watching silent movies to get a sense of how they adhered to one perspective, so as not to unnerve audiences at the time. "It's the evolution of cinematic language," he explains. "In the early days, people were disturbed if they couldn't see an actor's full figure — they felt they were cut in half or something. If you cut to



THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

SCARPETTA

Nicole Kidman and Jamie Lee Curtis will play sisters in Prime Video's adaptation of Patricia Cornwell's bestselling books. The series follows the personal and professional challenges faced by top Virginian coroner Kay Scarpetta (Kidman) when she returns to her hometown.



THE DINK

Josh Greenbaum (*Barb & Star Go To Vista Del Mar*) is making a pickleball comedy starring Jake Johnson and Ben Stiller. Johnson will lead as an over-the-hill tennis pro who picks up the paddle in an effort to save a local club and earn his father's respect. Production is underway.



ROOFMAN

Kirsten Dunst has boarded Derek Cianfrance's latest alongside Channing Tatum. She'll play a Toys R Us employee who forms an unlikely bond with an on-the-lam crook (Tatum) in the film, based on the bizarre true story of a thief who burgled over 40 McDonald's outlets via their roofs.





Clockwise from left: Margaret (Robin Wright) and Richard (Tom Hanks) in the colour-telly era; Starting out; Director Robert Zemeckis chats with his stars; Festive family fun.



someone in a room, you had to show them walking through the door, otherwise the audience would be confused." Zemeckis' combining of techniques from the past with CGI filmmaking tools that will define the future reflects the time-hopping nature of *Here*. "Because the audience's view is fixed, the universe can pass by," he says. "That becomes this very powerful way of talking about the idea that everything changes." Everything except, it seems, Zemeckis' drive to continue experimenting with the technical possibilities of cinema.

HERE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 JANUARY



EAST OF EDEN

Mike Faist will play 'Cain' figure Charles from John Steinbeck's source novel, in the Netflix limited-series take on the tale that starred James Dean in its first screen iteration. Florence Pugh and Christopher Abbott will co-star in the show, which Zoe Kazan — granddaughter of the Dean film's director Elia Kazan — has written.

THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE

Maika Monroe has landed the lead in Michelle Garza Cervera's upcoming remake of the 1992 Rebecca De Mornay-starring horror-thriller classic. The movie will follow Monroe's vengeful, widowed nanny as she infiltrates a family, seeking to destroy the mother and take her place.

ROBOCOP TV SERIES

Peter Ocko (the US *The Office*) and **James Wan** are working on a TV take on the sci-fi franchise. As per Paul Verhoeven's 1987 classic, the series — headed for Prime Video — will centre on a tenacious part-man, part-machine law enforcer tasked with cleaning up the streets.

BLACK MIRROR: SEASON 7

The next instalment of Charlie Brooker's dystopian series has announced its stacked line-up. Stars include "deep breath" **Awkwafina**, Peter Capaldi, Emma Corrin, Paul Giamatti, Cristin Milioti, Rashida Jones and Issa Rae. What's more, fan-favourite episode 'USS Callister' is getting a sequel.

THE BOYS: SEASON 5

The fifth and final (boo!) season of the popular superhero satire is going out in style as **Daveed Diggs** joins the already impressive ensemble. Details on his character remain under wraps, but he is set to be a series regular as the show's "gory, epic, moist climax" nears.



Top to bottom: Ralph Fiennes as Cardinal Lawrence; Isabella Rossellini as Sister Agnes; Stanley Tucci, right, plays Cardinal Bellini; Director Edward Berger, left, on set.



A thriller powered by prayer

BUZZY NEW FILM CONCLAVE TESTS THE FAITH OF RALPH FIENNES. *DOMINUS!*

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

AT ONE POINT in Vatican thriller *Conclave*, a cardinal does about the least cardinal-y thing a cardinal could do. He whips out a vape pen, then takes a puff. "It's just so important to find these moments of levity," laughs director Edward Berger of the unlikely sight. "But also, I was trying to find the contrast between this archaic world and modernity. Thus the vape, thus the cell phones, the photocopier, the Pope in a funny plastic bag... We're just like them, you know? We're all the same. We all end up in a body bag, basically."

Ah yes, the body bag. Just like dire 1991 Robbie Coltrane comedy *The Pope Must Die*, *Conclave* opens with the death of the supreme pontiff. Instead of shenanigans involving the Mafia, however, what unfurls is a thriller that's both elegant and exciting, as Cardinal Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) oversees an emergency lockdown — known in church-speak as a conclave — with high-level men of faith sequestered from the outside world until a new pope has been voted in. There are twists.

There are turns. There are prayers that will have you on the edge of your seat.

"I looked to '70s conspiracy thrillers, because they have such an incredible precision and sparsity," says Berger, whose previous film, *All Quiet On The Western Front*, was a pulse-pounding journey through the horrors of World War I. "In [Alan J.] Pakula's movies you'd have Warren Beatty in a wide shot for two minutes talking with his back to us, and then maybe a 15-second mid shot, and that's the scene. And so we tried to be inspired by that type of vocabulary, to create a mystery, a tension, a paranoia."

Despite the best researching efforts of the filmmakers and Robert Harris, the author of the 2016 source novel, there is immense secrecy around what a real-life conclave looks like. Rather than be frustrated by this, Berger found it invigorating. "It's a world shrouded in mystery, because every cardinal taking part has a vow of silence. But I'm much more interested in *creating* a reality than true reality." Hence the setting of Casa Santa Marta being stitched together from many different locations ("The real Casa Santa Marta — Google it — is unshootable; it's so ugly"). And hence, when Ralph Fiennes texted Berger a photo of himself wearing authentic robes in pre-production, during a visit to a cardinal (Berger won't divulge even the nationality of this person, for fear of getting them into trouble), the director's reply: "Ralph, this isn't the costume



we're going to use." Instead, something "richer, more powerful, more delicious" was stitched up. "Once in a while during shooting I got a little quip from Ralph saying, 'I'm very hot in this thick fabric,'" smiles Berger.

Regardless of over-heating its star and potentially irking Rome, *Conclave* is garnering serious Oscar buzz, not least for Fiennes' doubt-ridden performance. We'd say it has better odds than *The Pope Must Die*.

CONCLAVE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 NOVEMBER

Alamy, Getty Images, Pathé

THE MONTHLY MIXTAP

EMPIRE MIXMASTER
AMON WARMANN SELECTS
THIS MONTH'S
ESSENTIAL TUNES

'KISS THE SKY'

MAREN MORRIS

THE WILD ROBOT

This upbeat indie-folk song about the fun surprises that await you outside your comfort zone gives a boost to a pivotal montage in this joyous animated tale.

'EL ALEGATO'

ZOE SALDAÑA

EMILIA PÉREZ

An energetic opening number that gets more frantic as it progresses, with a rapping and singing Saldaña showcasing her do-all talent in this prize-winning Mexico-set musical.

'BARBARIAN HORDE'

HANS ZIMMER

GLADIATOR (RE-RELEASE)

Thunderous brass captures the frenetic intensity of battle as well as the glory of Maximus' heroic victory in the Colosseum. An all-timer cue that made me fall in love with film scores 20-plus years ago.

'GREATEST DAY'

TAKE THAT FEAT. CALUM SCOTT
(ROBIN SCHULZ REWORK)

ANORA

This unlikely but inspired needle drop starts Sean Baker's extraordinary stripper movie on a high, as the camera takes in a row of exotic dancers at work.

'THE FALL'

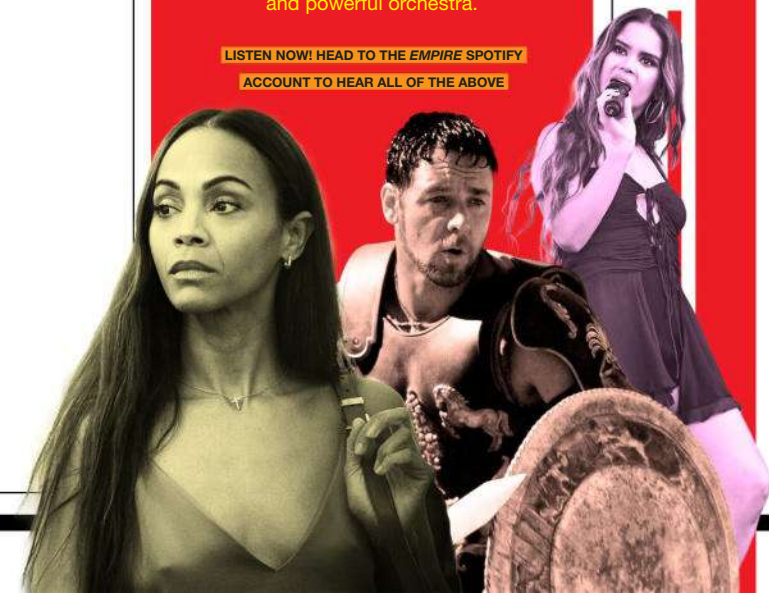
BRIAN TYLER

TRANSFORMERS ONE

Megatron falls just as Optimus Prime rises, and this track beautifully illustrates both transformations with a dramatic choir and powerful orchestra.

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HOW A NIMBLE-FINGERED ELF BROKE OUR HEARTS

THE RINGS OF POWER'S SECOND SEASON DELIVERED
A NEW MIDDLE-EARTH HERO: THE LOVEABLE,
DOOMED CELEBRIMBOR

IN ITS SOPHOMORE season, *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power* chucked a lot at us. A heavy-metal Troll. A Dwarf charging a Balrog. A sea-beast moonlighting as a high-court judge. But despite all the furore and marauding beasts, one character punched through to quietly prevail as fan-favourite season MVP. The Elven smith Celebrimbor, who is tricked by Sauron into forging magical rings, only to discover his world-threatening folly when it's already too late.

"I think there are exactly four sentences within the legendarium (*the writings of Tolkien*) about Celebrimbor," says co-showrunner J.D. Payne. "So from that we had to extrapolate an entire personality. But when you cast someone like Charles Edwards, they bring a depth of pathos to the character that we could never have hoped for in our wildest dreams." Celebrimbor appeared briefly in Season 1, and during a rehearsal at fellow actor Ben Walker's house, Edwards lit up when someone used the word "flattery", telling the writers excitedly, "He has a chink in the armour. He's a good guy, but there's a crack..."

"The crack, the crack, always the crack," Edwards tells *Empire* now. "They're always the most interesting. He's a wonderful craftsman; however, he has a chip on his shoulder. And that is what led to the building of the ambition and the pride and the never being happy with what he's done. And being led into a scheme that ultimately proves his downfall."

Most of the season saw Celebrimbor being puppeted by Sauron/Annatar (Charlie Vickers), egged on in his task of completing rings that will burnish his



Good Elf to you, sir: Charles Edwards as Celebrimbor (top), and with Charlie Vickers as Sauron/Annatar (above).

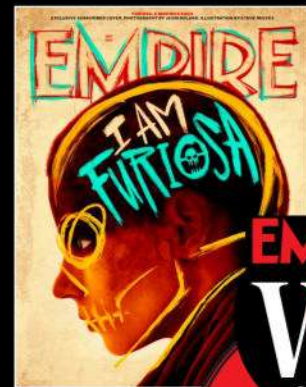
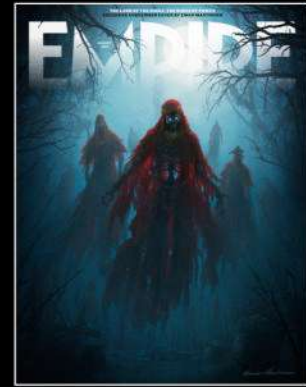
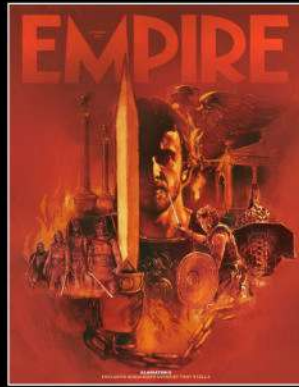
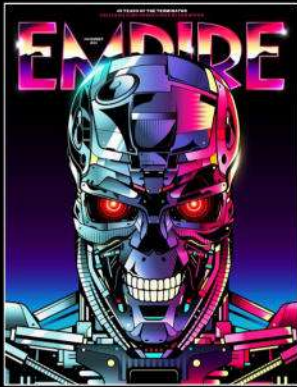
reputation throughout Middle-earth (and also, in information that is withheld, ensnare all the lands in darkness). Only when he spots a mouse repeatedly running through the same actions does Celebrimbor realise the awful truth: he's trapped in a simulation created by Sauron, duped into becoming Middle-earth's Oppenheimer. His fate is an unhappy one, but Celebrimbor manages to get some licks in before he goes, dignified to the end. "I wanted him to leave us with still quite a bit of fight in him, and to find his voice, really," Edwards says. "And to place a curse on Sauron, which effectively is what he does at the end."

In *Rings Of Power*, Celebrimbor's legacy is a dark one; in the real world, it's a lot lighter — fan art, tattoos, and cheers for Edwards at fan conventions for evermore. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

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SCAN HERE



How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Danny Dyer

THE EAST END LEGEND
PONDERES THE PRICE OF
SATIN AND SILK

WORDS ALEX GODFREY



Do you have any unusual hobbies?

I like to build stuff. I'm building something at the moment. (*Reaches over and shows Empire a tiny library made of wood*) It's a library. This one's quite tricky, because I've gotta wire it all up with the electrics, so the lamps work. I went through a mad stage with LEGO during lockdown. I built Hogwarts, which was amazing. So LEGO really got me into it and I thought, "Actually, I want to build other things." I've got these magnifying glasses, I look ridiculous, I look like Doc out of *Back To The Future*. But it keeps me indoors. The next thing I'm going to build, it's a train carriage from the 1940s. And then behind the train carriage there's a moving window so it looks like the train's moving. It looks quite tricky, but I'll start that once I've banged out me library. I just love it, I can squirrel away all day at it. I suppose it doesn't really suit my persona. But I think a man pushing 50 needs a hobby.

If you could time-travel, when and where would you go?

Oooh. Well, I suppose because of my ancestry I'd go back to the 16th century. Because I would want to meet Thomas Cromwell. My 15-times great-grandfather. The only reason I'm here is because his last act before his head was chopped off was that he made sure that his son Gregory married Elizabeth Seymour, who would have been my 15-times great-nan, who was sister of Jane Seymour — who Henry VIII loved so therefore he didn't kill Gregory. Because he didn't want to upset Elizabeth. And so if Gregory

had been killed, I wouldn't be here. So yeah, I'd like to see him and just give him a cuddle.

How much is a pint of milk?

It depends where you go, mate. It's the same as butter, innit — you go in one gaff and it's reasonably priced, and then you go into another gaff and it's eight quid for a tub. I go about 95 pence, a pound, around that sort of manor.

Do you have a signature dish?

A thing called vodka pasta. Which is basically vodka, obviously. Double cream, tomato puree, parsley, peas. And it makes a nice pink sauce. And because I like to feel a bit posh, I like to do the farfalle pasta, which is the little dickie bows. And when you serve it up you just put a little bit of chilli oil on it. You can bang it out in half an hour. It's a lovely bit of grub.

When were you last naked outdoors?

Oh God. Does it count just standing in me pants because... No? Oh, you want cock out, do ya? I don't know when I was bowling around outside with me cock out. And that's the truth. I don't think it's ever happened. I always go outside in the garden and have a fag in me pants. Rain, wind or shine. And that can be a nice little pair of briefs. It's near enough naked. I'm sat there having a cigarette.

Who would play you in a movie?

Me. It has to be me. How can I give another actor a job? Do you know how competitive

it is? Listen. Some would say I play myself, you know, my haters out there, it's a recurring thing that comes up. Well, no-one can play me better than me.

What is the most disgusting thing you've ever eaten?

I did eat some tuna sperm once, with my [daughter] Dani on a travel show. It's a delicacy in Sicily. But it was alright. I didn't mind, a bit of vinegar, a bit of white pepper, you know. I did try frogs' legs once and it does what it says on the fucking tin: it is just a plate of fucking frogs that have been chopped in half. And I noticed that, these frogs, some are a bit chunkier than others, you know, a bit muscly. I didn't like them at all. But I was in France, so I thought, you know. And I did notice that fucking French people don't even fucking eat frogs' legs, it's bullshit. So yeah, never again will I put a frog's leg in me mouth. Awful.

What song would you like to have played at your funeral?

Ooooh, that's a good one. I think I'd want to make people smile. So it would probably be the theme tune to *Steptoe & Son*. Just to lighten the mood slightly; I don't want people sobbing. I mean, I do want people to sob, of course. I would like a big East London funeral, like the Kray twins had. But I would like to keep it light-hearted.

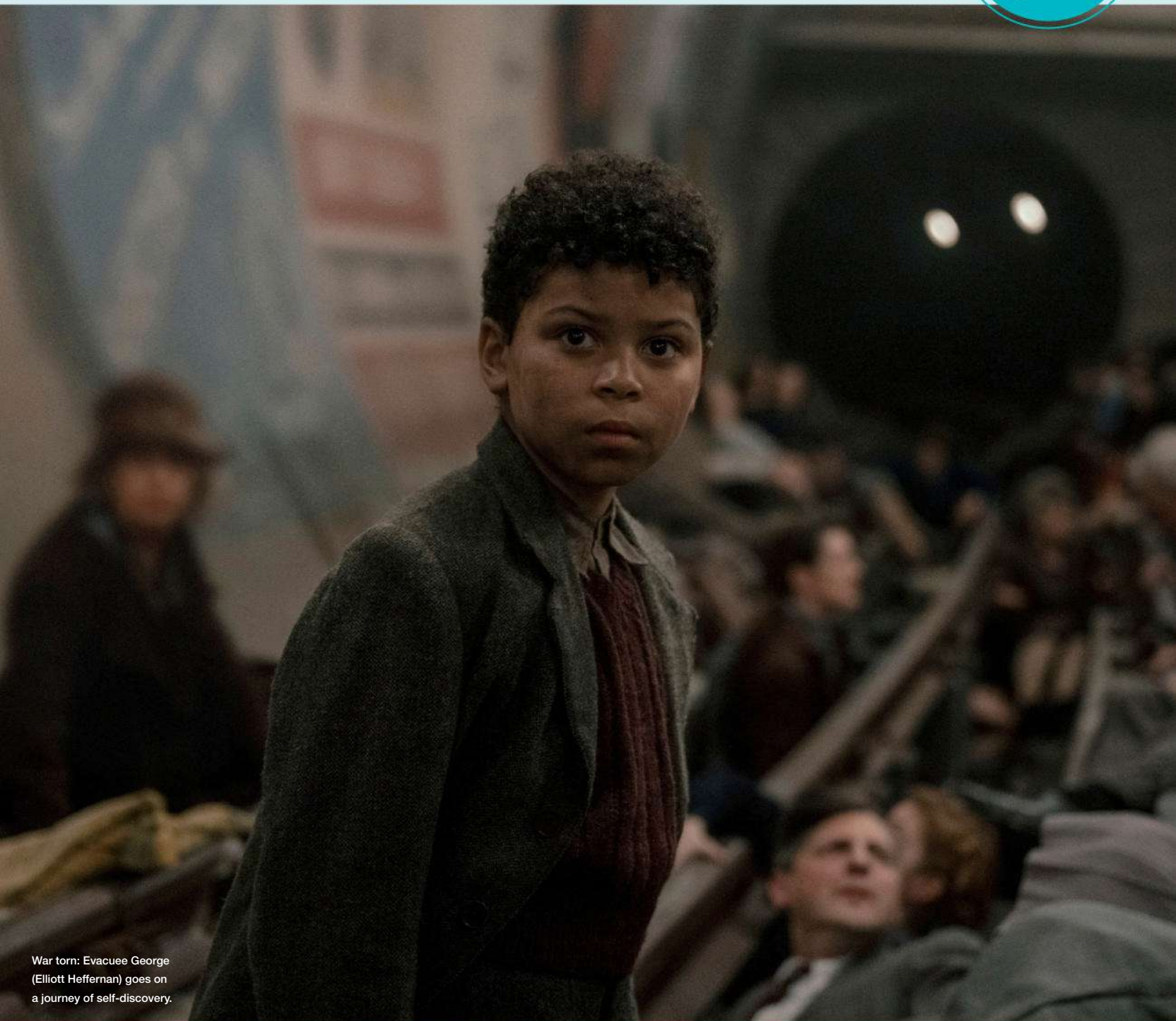
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reviews

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24 OCTOBER - 20 NOVEMBER 2024 | EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT



War torn: Evacuee George (Elliott Heffernan) goes on a journey of self-discovery.



Top to bottom:
Blitz spirit: Rita (Saoirse Ronan), son George and grandfather Gerald (Paul Weller); Air-raid warden Ife (Benjamin Clementine); Rita and George shelter in the Underground.

KEEP 'EM PEELED

Look out for Jamaican-born, British-based dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson as the Oracle, a street orator addressing the crowds on bustling London streets.

FILM

BLITZ

FOR McQUEEN & COUNTRY

★★★★

OUT 1 NOVEMBER (CINEMAS), 22 NOVEMBER (APPLE TV+) / CERT 12A / 120 MINS

DIRECTOR Steve McQueen

CAST Saoirse Ronan, Elliott Heffernan, Paul Weller, Harris Dickinson, Stephen Graham

PLOT Evacuated during the Blitz by his loving mother Rita (Ronan), nine-year-old George (Heffernan) jumps off the train and embarks on a long journey home.

THERE'S A SCENE early on in Steve McQueen's *Blitz* in which Rita (Saoirse Ronan), a munitions-factory worker with a talent for singing, reluctantly packs off her young, mixed-race son George (Elliott Heffernan) to the countryside to avoid the horrors of continuous bombing. It's a scenario we have seen a million times before — a tearful train-station goodbye — but McQueen makes it heart-rending. Over its two-hour running time, *Blitz* pulls off this trick constantly. Seen through McQueen's vibrant but clear-eyed lens, it takes stock situations from countless creaky black-and-white films and makes them feel raw, real and fresh.

The story starts with the ferocity of D-Day: *Saving Private Ryan* transported to Stepney Green. In the aftermath of a night-time Luftwaffe bombing sortie, firefighters are struggling to contain a raging blaze (think battling Drogon with a couple of pails of water). At one point, a canvas hose escapes from a fireman's clutches, knocks him unconscious and starts writhing around like a vicious serpent. It's at once brutal and beautiful, an intoxicating vision of World War II on the homefront.

Out of the carnage, a simple story emerges, flitting between the perspectives of George and Rita. From the moment George decides to alight that moving train, *Blitz* flirts with becoming a fable. There's train-top shenanigans, a run-in with a gang of broadly drawn Dickensian looters (Stephen Graham and Kathy Burke), and a flooded Underground station. This series of adventures can feel a tad baggy as the picaresque journey goes on, but it's almost always gripping.

Most movingly, George is on a voyage of self-discovery concerning his ancestry. He meets Ife (Benjamin Clementine, winning and warm), a Nigerian air-raid warden who catches him in a posh arcade looking at dioramas of colonial atrocities demonising Africans as savages.

George has consistently experienced racist taunts, but under Ife's gentle tutelage he movingly begins to find pride in his heritage.

Rita, meanwhile, is trying to find purpose without her son and volunteers at a community shelter for the displaced. Without ever being trite, McQueen captures the Blitz spirit, how war inspires a sense of togetherness and belonging. Proving we are perhaps not as forward-thinking as we think we are, *Blitz* not only depicts '40s London as a vibrant cultural melting pot but also reveals women as trailblazers, be it in activism, protesting the lack of safe shelters, or paving the way for the sexual liberation we traditionally associate with the '60s.

While his film invokes the greats of British cinema — the fire-fighting faces of documentarian Humphrey Jennings, the decency of Powell & Pressburger, the pub sing-a-longs of Terence Davies — McQueen finds a language all his own. He transforms the waves of the Thames as seen from German bombers into almost animated abstraction. Grainy imagery of flowers punctuates the action, gentle and elegiac. Perhaps most impressive is a montage of bomb-making, Hans Zimmer's music blurring with the mechanical rhythms of the machinery — the irony of Rita collaborating on instruments of death is not lost on the filmmaker.

As with McQueen's other films, music plays a big part throughout. It creates poignant moments of family intimacy, as when Rita, George and his grandfather (an effective Paul Weller, who, at one point, is literally going underground) sing 'Ain't Misbehavin' around the old Joanna. It provides a source of national comfort as Rita performs in a BBC broadcast from her factory. And it delivers an outlet for joy in the darkest circumstances. When the film flashes back to Rita meeting George's father Marcus (CJ Beckford), McQueen mounts a hot club scene, a fantastic inter-racial dance sequence full of sexiness and energy. Later, he throws us unexpectedly into a kick-ass big-band number at the Café de Paris, a subterranean space safe from falling bombs. The reveal as to why we are there is shattering.

Blitz sees Saoirse Ronan at the top of her game, delivering heart and steel in a pitch-perfect East End accent. But the film mostly rests on the shoulders of young Elliott Heffernan, who mixes vim and vigour with moments of stillness, conveying tons by doing very little. Rita is broken when she is forced to send her son away and, by the final reel, Ronan, Heffernan and McQueen will break you too. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT This is Steve McQueen's most accessible film to date, without diluting any of his power. Mixing epic sweep with textured detail, despite an episodic second half it will make even the stiffest upper lip quiver.



Christopher Reeve in the role which made him famous. **Right:** The actor, photographed by Herb Ritts. **Below right:** With his family.



FILM

SUPER/MAN: THE CHRISTOPHER REEVE STORY

MEET A TRUE MAN OF STEEL

★★★★★

OUT 1 NOVEMBER / CERT 12A / 104 MINS

DIRECTORS Ian Bonhôte, Peter Ettedgui

PARTICIPANTS Christopher Reeve, Robin Williams, Susan Sarandon, Glenn Close, Jeff Daniels

PLOT Christopher Reeve, the Hollywood icon best known for playing Superman, dedicates his life to disability advocacy after a horse-riding accident leaves him paralysed.

IN OUR ERA of cinematic universes, it feels like every actor has donned a cape at some point, but back in the days of Christopher Reeve's Superman, being a superhero represented something larger

than life. There was a responsibility, a moral code to abide by. You weren't just playing a superhero — you were one.

Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story is not afraid of equating Reeve to the Man Of Steel he played in four *Superman* films between 1978 and 1987. Archival footage from Reeve's films, interviews and personal home videos cut to CG vignettes of the actor cast in marble like a Greek deity — but that stone eventually cracks. Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui's documentary begins with the moment that irrevocably changed his life: Reeve was seemingly capable of superhuman feats himself, with a thrill-seeking interest in sailing, skiing and flying, but it was an accident during an equestrian competition in 1995 that left him paralysed. There's a cruel irony in that.

Save for the non-linear storytelling which jumps between Reeve's life following the accident and his career, the film offers a fairly standard account of the actor's life. His family and famous friends, such as Glenn Close and Susan Sarandon, tell his story from his early days as an accomplished theatre actor who fended off accusations that he was "selling out" by putting on a cape. (In one amusing anecdote, Jeff Daniels recalls William Hurt urging Reeve to turn down a *Superman* screen test.)

Thankfully, though, *Super/Man* doesn't veer

into full-on hagiography. Even Superman had his Kryptonite, and the documentary is refreshingly honest about the fallibility of its subject. As much as Reeve's three children love their father and have dedicated their lives to his cause since his passing, they're also open about the fact that he wasn't always present as a parent. Later in life, Reeve dedicated himself to disability advocacy, and the film doesn't shy away from his own faults as an activist, highlighting his misguided initial focus on research for a cure over investing in quality of life and care.

If Reeve wasn't a superhero in the fantastical sense, the film is a compelling document of a man who had special abilities in his own right, using his influence to change the ways the world views disabled people. *Super/Man* strikes a fine balance between the joy and tragedy of the actor's life, and in doing so, provides a comprehensive and life-affirming exploration of a star who embodied Superman in every sense. **IANA MURRAY**

VERDICT As far as documentaries go, this doesn't reinvent the wheel, but its emotional account of Reeve's life is a fitting tribute to a true superhuman.



SMALL THINGS LIKE THESE

★★★★

OUT 1 NOVEMBER / CERT 12A / 98 MINS

DIRECTOR Tim Mielants

CAST Cillian Murphy, Emily Watson, Eileen Walsh, Michelle Fairley

Perhaps it's appropriate that a story about a coal man should be an extremely slow burn, but there isn't much warmth for Cillian Murphy's fuel-seller as he figures out how to challenge the exploitation of young women by nuns in this drama about the Magdalene laundries scandal. It's typical of Murphy that he's used his Oscar-winner clout to adapt a sparsely worded novel by Claire Keegan (*Foster*). The result is powerful, even if it's as deeply understated as its terminally taciturn protagonist. Director Tim Mielants places the film on Murphy's shoulders and leaves him to explain how good people let bad things happen, and how we might push back against the dark. A quiet, reserved film, but one to give us all hope. **HOH**



THE CRIME IS MINE

★★★★

OUT 25 OCTOBER / CERT 12A / 102 MINS

DIRECTOR François Ozon

CAST Nadia Tereszkiewicz, Rebecca Marder, Fabrice Luchini, Isabelle Huppert

For a film that is mostly pure homage to 1930s cinema, there is nothing stale about *The Crime Is Mine*, a lavish period romp with a post-MeToo sensibility. After actor Madeleine (Nadia Tereszkiewicz) absconds from the mansion of a theatre producer, she becomes a prime suspect in his murder. Handily, Madeleine's roommate (Rebecca Marder) is a lawyer, hatching a plan to get her off the hook while landing some publicity. François Ozon's latest operates at the surface-level, but knowingly so. Revelling in its gorgeous costumes, set designs and swoony score, it might be a mash-up of different genres — there are nods to noir and screwball comedy — but is a chameleonic film to reflect a chameleonic director. **MB**



Agatha (Kathryn Hahn) comes over all toil-and-troubly. **Below:** No-one had expected Gandalf to show up.

TV

AGATHA ALL ALONG

THE (FIRST) SEASON OF THE WITCH

★★★★

OUT NOW (DISNEY+) / EPISODES VIEWED 4 OF 9

SHOWRUNNER Jac Schaeffer

CAST Kathryn Hahn, Joe Locke, Aubrey Plaza, Patti LuPone, Debra Jo Rupp

PLOT Three years after her battle with Wanda, Agatha (Hahn) breaks free from her spell, and sets about getting her powers back.

MUCH AS KATHRYN Hahn's mischievous witch Agatha Harkness was the MVP of the excellent *WandaVision*, one wouldn't be blamed for wondering if a spin-off series about her was really necessary. Four episodes into *Agatha All Along*, the primary reason it exists is clear: because Kathryn Hahn is simply too deliciously devious and charismatic in this role to not be unleashed on a bigger scale.

We find Agatha trapped in Wanda's spell — but where the Scarlet Witch played out her narrative via sitcoms, Agatha is envisioning herself as a *Mare Of Easttown*-esque detective in a Scandi-inspired crime drama. It's only when mysterious foe Rio (Aubrey Plaza) and a young, eyeliner-wearing burglar known only as Teen (Joe Locke) enter the fray that Agatha registers what's happening, and claws herself back to reality.

From there, Teen convinces her to journey down the mystical Witches' Road to regain her powers. They assemble a motley coven to get there — including crystal ball-gazing Lilia (Patti LuPone), potion-brewing wellness-peddler Jen (Sasheer Zamata), sullen daughter-of-a-rockstar Alice (Ali Ahn), and Westview resident Mrs Hart (Debra Jo Rupp). They're a refreshing if underdeveloped ensemble, each flawed in their



own way — but the real dynamite is Hahn herself. Agatha is witty, grumpy, constantly scheming and more emotional than she lets on, and Hahn exudes confidence in every guise. Chemistry crackles between her and Plaza as two mega-powerful beings with a deep, complicated, clearly romantic history. She also has an instantly lived-in rapport with Locke, who pulsates with positive energy as Agatha's fanboy-turned-familiar.

Once on the Road, the gang face a series of trials. These allow for a kind of episodic reinvention that calls back to *WandaVision*, but are the weakest part of the script — their mechanics feel random and not fully formed, the solutions handwaved away with witchy weirdness. But the magic here is in the dynamic between the cast and the frankly fabulous aesthetic, with costumes to die for, and flashes of true horror and darkness within the silly, spooky, wonderfully camp vibe. There are also several compelling mysteries — who Teen really is, what went down between Agatha and Rio, and how, if at all, this ties into the wider MCU.

For some Marvel fans, the tone and setting will be a turn-off — but *Agatha All Along* has more in common with witchy '90s favourites like *Hocus Pocus*, *Practical Magic* and *The Craft* than any, as Agatha calls them, "vengeance-seeker" movies. If you can get on board with that, there's plenty of fun to be had — and a brand-new balladic banger to enjoy. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT A charming concoction of snappy humour, strong performances and enchanting nostalgia that makes for perfect pre-Halloween viewing. Kathryn Hahn's sheer magnetism alone will have you spellbound.

Wedding belle: Ani (Mikey Madison) ties the knot with new beau Ivan (Mark Eydelshteyn).



WATCH FIRST

Anora shares some similarities, subconscious or not, with 1990's *Pretty Woman*. "I didn't even pick up on that until halfway through production," Sean Baker told *IndieWire*.

FILM

ANORA

A CINDERELLA STORY WITH A DIFFERENCE

★★★★★

OUT 1 NOVEMBER / CERT 18 / 139 MINS

DIRECTOR Sean Baker

CAST Mikey Madison, Mark Eydelshteyn, Yura Borisov, Karren Karagulian, Vache Tovmasyan

PLOT Sex worker Anora (Madison) crosses a powerful Russian family after she marries heir Ivan (Eydelshteyn) in a shotgun wedding.

SEAN BAKER SEES the world differently. He found a magic kingdom in the pastel purple of *The Florida Project*'s multi-storey inn. Made a washed-up porn star an avatar for the American Dream in *Red Rocket*. Set *Tangerine*'s frenzied tale of a transgender woman's revenge against the glittering backdrop of Christmas Eve. And now in *Anora*, his Palme d'Or-winning odyssey, turns Take That's 'Greatest Day' — a song largely adored by a mum

demographic — into a sex-worker anthem.

It makes for one hell of an opening sequence: Gary Barlow and co's hopeful lyrics about shared vitality (remixed to a club beat) scoring a line-up of athletic strippers, their customers barely visible beneath them. "Watch the world come alive tonight... Stay close to me." At the end of the undulating chorus line twirls Mikey Madison's Ani (short for Anora), smiling serenely, long, dark hair cascading around her, focused on the task in hand.

The following act treads a similar tone to Lorene Scafaria's slick yet tender *Hustlers*; like Constance Wu's newbie Destiny, Ani works the room — albeit at a more confident tempo — flashing a broader, fixed smile, pouncing at the sign of opportunity, and fielding distasteful comments from her clients ("Does your family know that you do this?"). Baker shades in her character in the moments between her private dances, of which there are at least six; Ani evaluating the crowd, comparing nail patterns over a cigarette with her colleague, and in spite of her lucrative night, eating a basic dinner out of Tupperware. She's driven and talented, yet the moneyed life she craves is still just out of reach. Until Ivan (Mark Eydelshteyn) walks in, a 21-year-old human puppy in garish leisurewear, whose designer sunglasses are

as big as his need to rebel against his Russian oligarch father.

Baker's hands-on approach to casting always yields thrilling results (he's credited as casting director on several of his films, including *Anora*), and here the bar has been raised even higher. Madison emerges from a background of solid secondary roles (a complicated teenage daughter in Pamela Adlon's excellent show *Better Things*, a Manson girl in *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*) as a blazing sun atop knee-high boots, complete with her own gravitational pull. Circumstance throws Ani and Ivan together — Ani is the only girl in the club who can speak Russian — but infatuation keeps him in her orbit, with Madison at the wheel, a paragon of charm, tenacity and savviness.

The last takes precedence in the film's second half, when Ani and Ivan's whirlwind, drug-bolstered romance climaxes in a Vegas wedding. Ani's gigantic diamond ring has barely warmed on her finger before the new in-laws' henchmen arrive, on strict instruction to annul the marriage. It's here that *Anora* momentarily loses its footing: in the wake of a furiously funny set-piece that sees Ani whip Tasmanian Devil-style around Ivan's overthrown home

Send in the clowns:
David Howard Thornton
as Art. **Below:** Lauren
LaVera plays Sienna.



Top to bottom: Can Ivan be trusted?; Henchmen on the hunt confront the couple; A sad-eyed Igor (Yura Borisov) takes a breather.

comes a long, mood-dampening hunt for the spineless Ivan, who has abandoned his new wife. Location always plays a distinct role in Baker's work (*The Florida Project's* aforementioned purple inn, *Tangerine's* sunset-kissed Hollywood), but this feels like a needless pivot from plot to place as Ani and the admittedly hysterically funny trio of hired hands stumble around wintry Coney Island. *Anora* is only slightly longer than Baker's last film, *Red Rocket*, but it's in this wayward stretch that you feel the film's 139-minute runtime could be mercifully crunched.

It's when Ani retrieves some agency that the film rolls back on track, which is both a testament to Madison's watchability and the strength of the character. One henchman, the perpetually uncomfortable yet affable Igor (Yura Borisov, a revelation), barely conceals his admiration for the sparky young woman in his company, and you feel right there with him. She may be in her early twenties but there's an aspirational quality — something more assured than scrappiness — to the way that Ani asserts and carries herself in a world uninterested in giving her a fair deal. Baker has the utmost talent of giving characters rooted on the periphery their own valiant trajectory (perhaps with the exception of Simon Rex's slippery *Red Rocket* protagonist), and Ani is his biggest triumph yet. Not all heroes wear capes, but some have been known to don towering stripper heels. Which are much harder to pull off. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT At once a frenzied fairy tale and a tender-hearted character study, *Anora* is an intoxicating pairing of director and star. Baker's unique, humanistic approach to filmmaking is as riveting and rewarding as ever.



FILM

TERRIFIER 3

THIS CLOWN IS NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAY PARTIES

★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 18 / 125 MINS

DIRECTOR Damien Leone

CAST David Howard Thornton, Lauren LaVera, Jason Patric, Elliott Fullam

PLOT Five years after his decapitation, supernatural serial killer Art the Clown (Howard Thornton) returns at Christmas to torment his arch-enemy, Sienna Shaw (LaVera).

THE SAGA OF writer-director Damien Leone's signature horror character Art the Clown began with *The 9th Circle*, a 2008 short which was recycled with other mini-movies (including a 2011 first draft of *Terrifier*) into a 2013 anthology film, *All Hallows' Eve*. David Howard Thornton didn't take over the role of the clown until the breakout feature version of *Terrifier* (2016). His exceptionally committed evil-mime performance — imagine Harpo Marx possessed by the Driller Killer — remains the centerpiece of an ongoing series which shows no signs of winding down.

Thornton's Art — a deceptively simple black-and-white clown costume and make-up, complete with silly miniature hat and rotten-tooth grin — stands out as perhaps the most hateful franchise fiend in contemporary horror, mocking victims as he rips them to gory chunks and taking the time to add petty humiliations like slaps to the back of the head to the grosser, gut-exposing atrocities which are his stock-in-trade.

Terrifier was a lean, nasty 85 minutes, and even then had to throw in an extra act after all its primary victims had been slaughtered. Both the sequels run well over two hours and work out a complicated, still-unfolding rationale for Art and his disfigured, demon-possessed former



victim/sidekick Victoria (Samantha Scaffidi).

This latest entry recalls Sienna Shaw (Lauren LaVera) from the last film, who seems predestined to be Art's nemesis. Her late father (Jason Patric, in flashbacks), a comics artist, has some psychic connection with the supernatural goings-on, which will presumably be elaborated on in *Terrifier 4*. Quite a bit of *Terrifier 3* is about the PTSD Sienna and her brother (Elliott Fullam) have suffered after their family and friends were bloodily disassembled in the earlier film. The fact that we meet a whole new branch of the Shaw family — who take Sienna out of a psychiatric facility for the Christmas holidays — is just teeing up more meat-puppets to be ripped apart in imaginatively cruel fashion.

Leone is good at sketching in set-up scenes, so the doomed souls aren't just obnoxious disposables, which adds a layer of cruelty to his gruesome approach. The horror of the *Terrifiers* combines the explicit, practical-effects gore of 1980s video nasties with the tied-to-a-chair-and-abused licks of 2000s torture porn. It's the cinema of throwing Christians to the lions, but — hey — that was a popular draw too.

You wonder whether in a happier world Leone would have preferred to make a franchise out of his nostalgic, throwback 2015 monster movie *Frankenstein Vs. The Mummy*. (“*Frankenstein* — there's a classic,” muses a kindly bus driver in a throwaway line.) But maybe Art the Clown is the 2020s monster we deserve. **KIM NEWMAN**

VERDICT Managing to go further over-the-top and pushing more offence buttons than you think possible, this is recommended only for the strong of stomach and hard of heart.



Ghost in the machine: The Charles family face a dilemma. **Below:** Erykah Badu takes centre stage.

FILM

THE PIANO LESSON

THE WASHINGTON FAMILY TINKLE THE IVORIES

★★★

OUT 8 NOVEMBER / CERT 12A / 127 MINS

DIRECTOR Malcolm Washington

CAST Samuel L. Jackson, John David Washington, Ray Fisher, Erykah Badu, Danielle Deadwyler, Corey Hawkins

PLOT An elaborately carved piano becomes a symbol of grief, legacy and honour for one warring family in 1930s Pittsburgh.

PLAY-TO-FILM adaptations can often flourish thanks to the little tricks and turns that only the silver screen can provide: whether it's Jack Nicholson's claustrophobic close-up as he exclaims guilt in *A Few Good Men*, or the frantic editing of *Amadeus*. On the other hand, some adaptations do too little and end up feeling literally 'stagey' as a result. With *The Piano Lesson* in particular, it feels like not much has been gained by re-rendering this Pulitzer-winner on celluloid.

Adapted from August Wilson's play — part of the 'Pittsburgh Cycle' that includes *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (all three now Denzel Washington-produced films) — *The Piano Lesson* is set in 1936 in Pittsburgh, where the Charles family live, with a large piano sitting unused in their house. Doaker (Samuel L. Jackson) explains the musical instrument's tragic backstory: enslaved ancestors were traded so that the white head of the house could get his hands on the piano. Later the family stole the piano back to reclaim their ancestors' dignity, but come the 1930s, Boy Willie (John David Washington) is back in town and wants to sell it for cash.



This is very much a Washington family joint, with dad Denzel and daughter Katia producing, son Malcolm directing (in his feature debut), son John David starring, and daughter and wife Olivia and Pauletta making cameos. Even so, the movie's most valuable player is Danielle Deadwyler. As the grieving Berniece, she distills decades of inherited anguish into each wide-eyed glare; despite the character's calcified bravado, there's a softness, too, that sands off the edges. Wilson was known for celebrating the vernacular of Black America, creating fascinating and three-dimensional characters, and Berniece brilliantly epitomises this: earthy, authentic and multi-layered.

If only the film was as consistently vibrant as her performance. There are certainly lively scenes — such as the opening piano-heist flashback, set during Fourth Of July festivities; some pleasingly kinetic musical-hall sequences featuring music legend Erykah Badu; and most significantly, the moments where Berniece and Boy Willie lock horns on how best to pay tribute to their ancestors. Washington wrestles with ideas of legacy and how one should honour one's forebears. But the film rarely elevates the play's action in a significant way, the transitions between comedy, drama and horror sometimes feeling clumsy. It's a shame, because when Washington does flex his budding directorial muscles, *The Piano Lesson* finds its melody.

STEPH GREEN

VERDICT This drama works best when it's not taking its cues directly from its source material. It may not be always totally compelling, but Deadwyler elevates every scene she's in.



FILM

BIRD

★★★★

OUT 8 NOVEMBER / CERT 15 / 119 MINS

DIRECTOR Andrea Arnold

CAST Nykiya Adams, Barry Keoghan, Franz Rogowski

Andrea Arnold delivers another signature kitchen-sink-meets-magical-realism coming-of-ager, which sees Nykiya Adams play Bailey, a spiky, impulsive presence longing for connection. Stuck in a squatted home with eccentric father Bug (Barry Keoghan), she worries about her siblings and mother living with an abusive new partner, when the mystical, childlike Bird (Franz Rogowski, mesmerising as ever) wanders into her life. This film is full of tenderness, idiosyncrasy and emotional gut-punches, as the characters explore the difference between the family they hoped for and the one they have — though the flashes of violence, mostly grounded as they are, make for some tonal whiplash. You will well up at the end. **SB**



FILM

THE FRONT ROOM

★★

OUT 25 OCTOBER / CERT 15 / 95 MINS

DIRECTORS Max Eggers, Sam Eggers

CAST Brandy, Kathryn Hunter, Andrew Burnap, Neal Huff

A horror-thriller which might also be attempting comedy — it's sometimes hard to tell. Black, pregnant anthropology professor Belinda (Brandy) and her white husband Norman (Andrew Burnap) are forced to remain on guard when the latter's estranged, deeply religious stepmother Solange (Kathryn Hunter) moves in. It feels like an ill-conceived *Get Out* knock-off without a fraction of the insight into American racism, and what ought to be unnerving is mostly off-putting. Hunter does set the screen ablaze with her hilariously cartoonish performance, pratfalling and gesticulating wildly. Unfortunately, her presence alone isn't enough to rescue a movie that feels conceptually doomed. **SA**

The high-kicking, artefact-bothering adventurer is back.



TV

TOMB RAIDER: THE LEGEND OF LARA CROFT

COME BACK, ANGELINA, ALL IS FORGIVEN

★ ★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

SHOWRUNNER Tasha Huo

CAST Hayley Atwell, Allen Maldonado, Earl Baylon, Richard Armitage, Zoe Boyle

PLOT When a magical Chinese artefact is stolen from Croft Manor, Lara Croft (Atwell) ventures out on a mission across the globe.

EVER SINCE DEBUTING as a blocky adventure video game back in 1996, the *Tomb Raider* series has shown remarkable sticking power. Lara Croft has appeared in over 20 games, three live-action

films (with another reboot planned), comics, novels, and now this new anime-inspired animated series. Set between the recent game reboot trilogy and the original '90s series, *The Legend Of Lara Croft* looks to find the balance of the character, landing somewhere between the brutally violent recent games and the less serious adventurer from the earlier entries. The result is a different but not entirely successful take on one of gaming's most enduring icons.

It hits the ground running in Episode 1, making a case for its animated medium with the kind of high-flying action sequences that would not have been possible with Lara, live-action edition. The show does a decent-enough job of capturing Lara's signature gymnastics, although the animation is not at the same standard as other recent shows from Powerhouse Animation Studios (such as *Castlevania* or *Blood Of Zeus*).

In fact, there are points where the visuals creak under the weight of what Lara's high-octane battles require. Ten years ago, this might have been top-tier, but with the standard of animation at such high levels these days, we expect more. Save for an ingenious segment in Episode 6 (a neat parody of old '80s-style hammy educational videos), it's a disappointment.

Lara's new animated form also seems to lead to a greater focus on magic and the supernatural.

The *Tomb Raider* franchise is no stranger to the occasional mythical beast, but *The Legend Of Lara Croft* leans too heavily in this direction. Lacking the wicked, gothic flair of a series like *Castlevania*, the endless parade of otherworldly threats seems only to borrow from lacklustre old video-game tropes. Too many of the set-pieces feel uninspired — including multiple weapons-upgrade side-quests, and what can only be described as an outdated boss battle from the '90s.

At the very least, it gets characterisation mostly right, and seems to understand Lara Croft's enduring appeal as an ass-kicking archaeologist. Led by a pitch-perfect performance from Hayley Atwell, the voice cast (including Earl Baylon as Lara's long-suffering friend Jonah) are a lot of fun. They do a lot of heavy lifting in grounding the overblown fantasy elements with warm banter and heartfelt camaraderie. It's in those less legendary human connections that the show draws its biggest strength. If only the rest of the show followed suit. **DAVID OPIE**

VERDICT *The Legend Of Lara Croft* is an uneven bridge between the old and new of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, one that doesn't quite live up to the high standards of the recent video-game-to-anime renaissance.

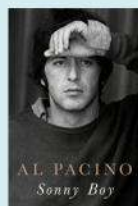
BOOKS

SONNY BOY

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE OUT...

★★★★★

AUTHOR AL PACINO



"WRITING THIS BOOK, I'm finding out a little more about myself," Al Pacino notes towards the end of *Sonny Boy*. "Objectively, I never knew what the fuck I was doing."

For the reader, too, we find out rather a lot more about him. It's fascinating to see one of the greatest screen actors of all time wrestle humbly and unselfconsciously with his own past, and attempt to square his extraordinary career with his very ordinary beginnings.

Reading the account of his early life as a second-generation Italian-American in the South Bronx, you can almost hear the *Godfather* theme tune playing. His story is much like the Corleone story — almost literally, given his grandfather came from a Sicilian town called Corleone. He began life stuck in "the mud of poverty", sharing a tenement with his grandparents, his mother dying young, his father out of the picture.

A quiet, shy, only child, solace came from the pictures. "I had to have been the only five-year-old who was brought to *The Lost Weekend*," he recalls, referring to Billy Wilder's bleak 1945 noir. As a little boy, he would recreate Ray Milland's alcoholic acting as a party trick, the makings of a serious dramatist all there already. "Even at five years old," Pacino writes, "I would think: what are they laughing at? This man is fighting for his life."

These early passages are full of the colour and character of postwar New York. The 1960s



Say hello to my little book: Al Pacino tells the story of his life in a new memoir.

feel full of possibility: "a renaissance... our Berlin in the 1920s". Pacino comes across as a sensitive soul, obsessively, intellectually, and spiritually curious: reading Chekhov as a teenager, or finding abandoned factories in which to practise Shakespearean soliloquies out loud.

His accounts of his most famous roles — *The Godfather*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Scarface* — might feel less revelatory, with stories that have been told elsewhere, but he weaves in personal nuggets. His first meeting with Marlon Brando is very funny, the actor eating chicken cacciatore throughout ("Gobble gobble gobble gobble", is how it is written), and he recalls signing an autograph on a newspaper with the headline "PACINO FAILS MISERABLY AS SCARFACE". (It remains, he says, "the biggest film I ever did".)

He's candid, too, about his failures and taking on roles to stay financially afloat (*Righteous Kill*, he now admits, was "not good"). Mortality looms towards the latter half of the book — he shares that he recently temporarily lost the use of his vocal chords, and nearly died after a nasty bout of Covid — yet he still thinks constantly of his youth in the South Bronx, and the hole where a father figure should have been. "Sometimes you [only] get looked at as a body of work," he laments at one point. This book helps you see the man behind the "hoo-ahh". **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT This disarmingly frank memoir by one of our greatest actors has the remarkable effect of making a larger-than-life figure feel more human than ever.

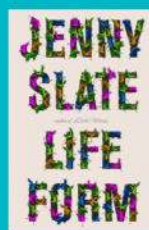


MARVEL ENCYCLOPEDIA

★★★★★

EDITORS ALAN COWSILL, MELANIE SCOTT, JAMES HILL

First released five years ago, this huge new update adds a ton to the already giant Marvel comic-book guide. Engagingly written and brightly laid out, there are thousands of heroes and villains to pore over, from the famous (Spider-Man) to the obscure (Man-Thing). For comic fans, it's a solid stocking filler — if you have a big enough stocking. **JN**



LIFEFORM

★★★★★

AUTHOR JENNY SLATE

Imagined therapy sessions, gossiping raccoons, and many, many stream-of-consciousness musings colour Jenny Slate's sophomore book, which sees the actor-comedian take a novel (well, epistolary) approach to chronicling the emotional maelstrom of first-time motherhood. Slate's unapologetically messy, honest exploration of the myriad ways having a child changes women is a thought-provoking read. **JK**



THE LAST DREAM

★★★★★

AUTHOR PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

Legendary Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar has never written a memoir, and in the introduction to this short-story collection, he vows he never will. Instead, this is a "fragmentary autobiography", with stories blurring fact and fiction. Like his films, they are keenly observed, melodramatically powerful, sad and sardonic (sometimes in the same sentence), and always spiritually sumptuous. **JN**



Clockwise from main: The 'Tecto' production crew walk and talk; Actors assemble! Justin Edwards suits up.



KILLER QUOTE

"The fish people are carrying a lot of thematic luggage."

DANIEL (HIMESH PATEL)

TV

THE FRANCHISE

THERE WAS AN IDEA... TO BRING TOGETHER A GROUP OF NOT-SO-REMARKABLE PEOPLE

★★★★★

EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8 / OUT 21 OCTOBER (SKY/NOW)

SHOWRUNNER Jon Brown

CAST Himesh Patel, Aya Cash, Jessica Hynes, Billy Magnussen, Lolly Adefope, Richard E.

Grant, Daniel Brühl

PLOT As filming on superhero movie 'Tecto: Eye Of The Storm' inches towards disaster, first assistant director Daniel (Patel) desperately tries to keep things on track.

THERE'S BEEN NO shortage of superhero movies in the last few years — and no shortage of some less-than-heroic behind-the-scenes reports to go along with them, too. So it's almost surprising it's taken this long for a show like *The Franchise* to come along. The brainchild of producers Armando Iannucci, Sam Mendes

and showrunner Jon Brown, this is — like *The Thick Of It* or *Veep* — a workplace satire, one that shines a cutting, sharply funny light on cinema's comic-book craze.

From episode to episode, there is seemingly no limit to the amount of hilariously undignified chaos unfurling on the set of fictional superhero movie 'Tecto'. Said chaos ranges from garden-variety nonsense — studio interference, late-in-the-day script edits, actors not leaving their trailers for *reasons* — to the more superhero-specific. Brown's targets are keenly tuned in this regard, his barbs sharp. From the overworking of VFX artists, to the importance placed on a perfect cameo, even the most ardent MCU/DCU fans will have to admit to the accuracy of certain biting digs (once they've finished chuckling).

It helps that all the actors are beyond committed to the bit. Daniel Brühl and Richard E. Grant — both of whom are card-carrying members of the MCU — revel in delivering filthy, foul-mouthed dialogue, and Billy Magnussen frequently showcases his penchant for physical comedy as Adam, an insecure actor hoping his starring role in 'Tecto' will boost his career. Aya Cash and Darren Goldstein, as producers trying to

save their own asses as much as the films, are brash delights, while Lolly Adefope brings a sunny demeanour to her third AD Dag, a warm and witty presence in spite of whatever insanity is befalling the set.

But just as the best superhero movies are about more than flashy fight sequences, *The Franchise*

ultimately reveals itself to be about more than witty jokes. Its heart is embodied by Himesh Patel's first AD, Daniel. "When you make movies like this, and they're good..." he muses earnestly at one point, pleading with the powers-that-be for a more comics-accurate fan-friendly script, "there's nothing better." The hope that what they're working on could be something special turns him into the weary, capeless hero of the series, and Patel's performance is a perfect balance of exasperation and determination.

The question of whether it's worth putting yourself through all the chaos to get to the other side is not one that's definitively answered here. But while the train wreck presented in *The Franchise* hardly looks like much fun to participate in, it's a riot to watch.

AMON WARMANN

VERDICT A consistently funny skewering of the trials and tribulations of making a superhero movie. Phase One of the *Franchise Television Universe* (FTU) is off to a strong start.

GAMES

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ECHOES OF WISDOM

THIS TIME, IT'S LINK WHO NEEDS RESCUING

★★★★★

NINTENDO SWITCH

THE *LEGEND OF Zelda* series has rarely focused on the eponymous princess herself, usually reduced to a damsel-in-distress for elfin swordsman Link to rescue. So when *Echoes Of Wisdom* was announced, offering Zelda a chance to headline a game (a pair of infamously awful ones for the long-forgotten CD-i don't count), it was a notable moment.

Thankfully, *Echoes Of Wisdom* rises to the occasion, at once feeling like a timeless entry while also introducing new mechanics and ideas. It starts out familiarly, with Link out to rescue Zelda, but a twist of fate sees Link pulled into one of a series of rifts appearing across Hyrule, and Zelda having to save the day instead. However, rather than brandishing a sword and shield, Zelda is gifted the 'Tri Rod' by a fairy, able to store the 'memory' of items and then create 'echoes' of them at will.

This is the hook, the gadget *du jour* for this particular *Zelda* game, and it's fantastic. Zelda can recreate almost everything she encounters, using those objects to overcome obstacles (need to climb a ridge? Create a staircase out of beds!) or solve puzzles in dungeons as she seeks to close the rifts for good. It completely changes the series' approach to combat, too — while Zelda



could echo a rock to throw at an enemy, better still to copy said enemy and then send echoes of it out to battle on your behalf. While a clever twist does eventually allow Zelda to take a more direct fighting role herself, it's always more fun to have your enemies do your dirty work for you.

Despite the game's classic top-down visuals — the same joyful toybox aesthetic as used in the *Link's Awakening* remake — the versatility of the Tri Rod is more evocative of the 'try anything' freedom of *Tears Of The Kingdom*. Puzzles, even boss fights, rarely have one solution, and half the thrill is in finding innovative ways of using Zelda's echoes to overcome them. Even the world itself almost begs to be broken, challenging you to find ways to get over a barrier

you're not meant to.

There's some repetition, though, which can feel like misdirection at best, clutter at worst. Similarly, figuring out which echoed enemy is best to pit against others can drag. As a result, *Echoes Of Wisdom* won't have quite the universal appeal *Tears Of The Kingdom* did, but it's a splendid addition to the *Zelda* canon, and a grand solo debut for Zelda herself.

MATT KAMEN

VERDICT *Zelda finally comes good with one of the smartest entries in the series. There's perhaps too much trial-and-error for some, but in thousands of small ways, *Echoes Of Wisdom* makes you feel like a genius. Link who?*



THE KARATE KID: STREET RUMBLE

★★★

NINTENDO SWITCH, PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

A retro-style scrolling beat-'em-up is perfect for *The Karate Kid*, a franchise rooted in '80s nostalgia. *Street Rumble* largely proves that point, offering a condensed retelling of the original trilogy, styled like arcade games of the time. With four playable fighters — Daniel, Miyagi, Ali, and Kumiko — recreated in beautifully animated pixel form, it's fun for fans, but lacks surprises as a brawler. **MK**



FUNKO FUSION

★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

The ubiquitous pop culture tie-in toys found on store shelves worldwide make their inevitable bobbleheaded leap to gaming in this transparent clone of LEGO games. Despite clear love for properties featured such as *Jurassic World* and *Hot Fuzz*, a focus on terrible third-person shooting and a litany of bugs rob this of any charm. Sadly, this Funko is best left in the box. **MK**



DEAD RISING DELUXE REMASTER

★★★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

Much more than just another prettied-up re-release, this marries a considerable facelift with significant gameplay improvements and subtle quality-of-life tweaks that address most of the zombie-slaying original's flaws. Thanks to this ambitious overhaul, it's easier than ever to enjoy the satire, slapstick and gore-soaked slaughter that made this Romero-inspired classic stand out from the brain-craving pack nearly 20 years ago. **MC**



A friend in need: Ingrid (Julianne Moore) with Martha (Tilda Swinton).

FILM

THE ROOM NEXT DOOR

PEDRO ALMODÓVAR GOES FULL ENGLISH

★★★★★

OUT 25 OCTOBER / CERT 12A / 107 MINS

DIRECTOR Pedro Almodóvar

CAST Julianne Moore, Tilda Swinton, John Turturro, Alessandro Nivola

PLOT Suffering from a terminal illness, Martha (Swinton) asks her longtime friend Ingrid (Moore) to be with her when she ends her own life.

IT IS STRANGE to watch a Pedro Almodóvar film where characters speak English. This is the veteran Spanish filmmaker's 23rd feature film and the only one not in his native Spanish, New York swapping in for the familiar streets of his hometown of Madrid. It's a brave move for an artist in his mid-seventies to temporarily relocate

to a new country and language, and the experience for the audience is initially a little uncanny. His regular trademarks — a sumptuous colour palette; women on the verge of a nervous breakdown; a story partly about his mother; a very well-appointed kitchen — are all still there. But the oddness of hearing his typically florid dialogue in another tongue takes some getting used to.

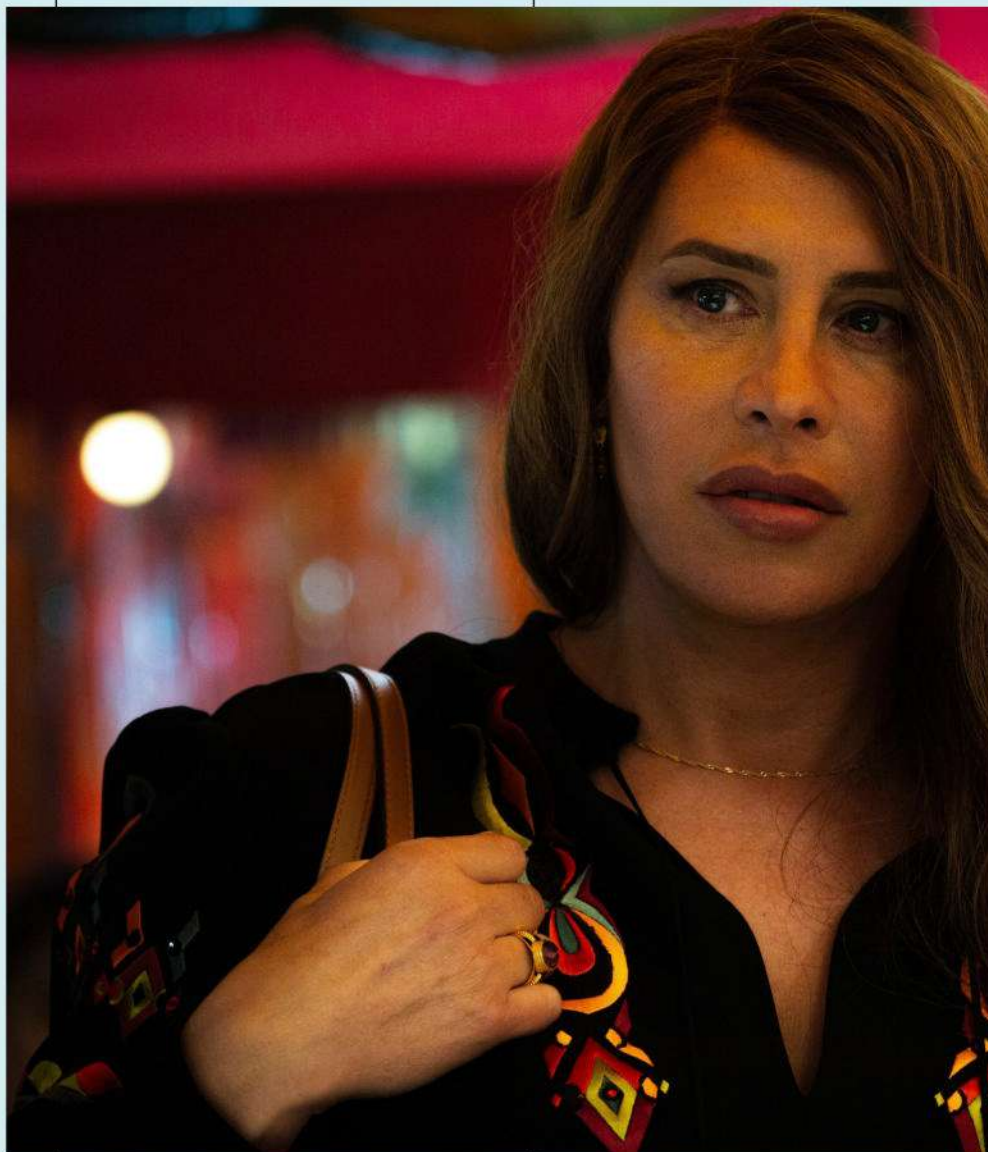
As she did in last year's similarly melodramatic *May December*, Julianne Moore embraces his heightened style. She plays Ingrid, an author who hears that her friend Martha (Tilda Swinton, more understated than usual, though still devastating in rouge lipstick) is suffering from inoperable cervical cancer. Both women are writers who have confronted death in different ways: Ingrid has written a book about her fear of mortality; Martha spent years as a war reporter. Now, not wishing to face further painful treatment, Martha has decided to end her own life using an illegal drug sourced from the dark web, and would like Ingrid to be with her when it happens, in a leafy upstate New York rented house.

What follows is a carefully calibrated human drama about life, the end of it, and what it means when a writer truly seizes control of her own narrative. "I think I deserve a good death," Martha argues. It's difficult to disagree.

But Almodóvar calmly lays out all the arguments and counter-arguments for voluntary assisted dying through a typically philosophical and artistic lens, centring two characters as culturally literate as he is. The film is adapted from the book *What Are You Going Through* by Sigrid Nunez but feels distinctly Almodóvarian, deeply in tune with his more recent works — especially the superb *Pain & Glory* — which all feel laced with anxiety about impermanence.

Like his last feature, *Parallel Mothers*, it is on the surface an issues-driven film, tossing over the ethics and legality of a timely debate. Yet the director imbues it all with an incorrigible humanity. Once you acclimatise to the English language set-up, it really sings. And Swinton and Moore — two actors who seem tailor-made to be the director's muses, as important to him as Penélope Cruz or Carmen Maura have been — are absorbing and surprising, right to the end. We would all be lucky to have either of them in the room next door, when the inevitable happens. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT Take some time to adjust to Almodóvar's English-language debut and you'll find a warm, wise and deeply moving melodrama, almost on a par with his best recent work.



Ex-cartel boss Emilia Pérez (Karla Sofía Gascón).
 Below: Lawyer Rita Moro Castro (Zoe Saldaña).
 Bottom: Ex-wife Jessi (Selena Gomez).



FILM

EMILIA PÉREZ

MAMMA MIA!, THIS AIN'T

★★★

OUT 25 OCTOBER / CERT TBC / 132 MINS

DIRECTOR Jacques Audiard

CAST Zoe Saldaña, Karla Sofía Gascón, Selena Gomez, Adriana Paz, Mark Ivanir, Édgar Ramírez

PLOT Rita Moro Castro (Saldaña), a lawyer in Mexico City, is forced into taking an unexpected job: arranging for a gang leader (Gascón) to transition into becoming a woman.

HERE IS AN unusual film from a restless mind. French filmmaker Jacques Audiard's eclectic career has already seen a gritty prison drama (*A Prophet*), a comedy Western (*The Sisters Brothers*) and a romantic drama about orcas (*Rust And Bone*). His latest, *Emilia Pérez*, is part drug-cartel gangland thriller, part trans coming-of-age drama, part grand melodrama, and part opera libretto musical. It's nothing if not unique.

Zoe Saldaña stars as an exhausted,

hard-working lawyer in Mexico City, too busy to have a life of her own. Then one day she is kidnapped on the streets by machine-gun-wielding gangsters and hustled into a van. But the kidnapping is not a death sentence or a hostage situation: instead, it's an unlikely (and compulsory) job offer. She is to organise and oversee the transition of a fearsome cartel leader (Karla Sofía Gascón), who wishes to fake her own death and begin a new life as a woman.

This would be a wild enough story on its own — tackling issues like gender, wealth inequality, and Mexico's many thousands of 'disappearances' — were it not for the fact that its characters also regularly spontaneously break into song. It's rare to see an original musical on the screen, and kudos to French singer Camille and her partner Clément Ducol for writing truly original songs, staged with verve and energy by Audiard, and attacked with gusto by the cast.

It's an impressive cast, too. Saldaña has been largely blue (*Avatar*) or green (*Marvel*) for the past decade. It's a treat to see her in her most human role in years. She's excellent, if slightly forgotten about during the middle of the film. Selena Gomez is also good value as the ex-wife of the cartel leader, even if pop fans might be disappointed at the underuse of her musical talents.

But it's the relatively unknown Karla Sofía

Gascón who is the biggest revelation, as the title character. Hers is an extraordinary performance, layered and textured, tinged with both sadness and menace. Gascón walks a complicated line between the liberation of Emilia's new life and the guilt of her old one, and does it all with remarkable poise and grace.

It's a shame, given this transformative turn and the rare leading-role screentime afforded to her, that Audiard's script and perspective too often indulge in some of the laziest tropes of trans stories from cis writers. Characters misgender and deadname Emilia; Emilia herself suggests at one point she is "half a woman"; there is greater focus on her physical surgery over any internal journey. One song where a doctor merrily sings about penises and vaginas feels clunky and inconsiderate, too. And it all builds to a gun-toting overkill of a finale that undermines what came before it. Still, for better and for worse, you won't see anything else like it this year. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT Jacques Audiard's outlandish musical thriller is a little jumbled, and a little misjudged in the treatment of its characters. But you can't doubt its audaciousness.



Top to bottom: Happy: Pharrell Williams in plastic form; A young Pharrell in the studio.

FILM

PIECE BY PIECE

PHARRELL WILLIAMS IS BRICKING IT

★★★

OUT 8 NOVEMBER / CERT PG / 94 MINS

DIRECTOR Morgan Neville

PARTICIPANTS Pharrell Williams, Gwen Stefani, Kendrick Lamar, Timbaland, Justin Timberlake, Busta Rhymes, Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg

PLOT A documentary about the life and career of singer, rapper, über-producer and polymath entrepreneur Pharrell Williams — told entirely through the medium of LEGO.

"IT'S HAPPENING," GOES a lyric sung over the opening titles of *Piece By Piece*. "Yes... It's real." Just to be sure, here is confirmation, early doors: yep, this is a real film. We've had *LEGO Movies* about Batman, Ninjas, Scooby-Doo. But a *music documentary LEGO Movie*?

Made with the full participation of self-described "hybrid thinker" Pharrell Williams, *Piece By Piece* is a surprisingly sincere and serious film about a sincere and serious artist, some distance from the irony-led Lord & Miller LEGO entries. It's quite a handbrake turn for Oscar-winning documentarian Morgan Neville (*20 Feet From Stardom*), but it largely follows the standard talking-heads doc template very faithfully. Just in LEGO.

The first act serves almost as a potted history of the vibrant '90s hip-hop and R&B scene in Virginia: obsessed with music, Williams surrounded himself with other Virginian up-and-comers like Timbaland and Missy Elliott. Hilariously, they and other contributors — including megastars Jay-Z, Gwen Stefani and Snoop Dogg — make appearances here entirely in LEGO minifigure form.

When Neville embraces the limitlessness of animation, it feels alive and full of possibility: Williams' childhood synesthesia, experiencing music as colour, is gorgeously realised. But the



limitations of the minifigures, with their jerky movement and basic expressions, feels at odds with the human story. Elsewhere, the corporate toy tie-in just feels grossly inappropriate: there is a LEGO Black Lives Matter march, for example, and a LEGO Martin Luther King.

The story could use more insight, too. Sometimes it feels like we're simply watching 'The Rise And Rise of Pharrell Williams'; his only problem seems to be being *too* successful. Given the project was pitched by Williams himself, it's possible the perspective of the film is slightly limited. Robin Thicke's 'Blurred Lines', for example, is only briefly heard on the soundtrack, with no mention of the backlash that followed it; nor is there reference to the ongoing legal dispute between Williams and his Neptunes producing partner Chad Hugo.

Still, Williams is an engaging and earnest subject, with an undeniable gift for playful, funky, futuristic beats, and the soundtrack is impeccable, of course. From 'Hella Good' to 'Frontin' to 'Get Lucky' to 'Happy', Williams is responsible for an astonishing number of exceptional bangers. LEGO Busta Rhymes notes that at one point during the 2000s he had a "hot hand", a statement you cannot disagree with. When the beat kicks in for 'Drop It Like It's Hot': guaranteed goosebumps.

The question remains, though: why LEGO? The answer seems to be — well, Pharrell Williams just really likes LEGO. Fair enough, really. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT *Piece By Piece's* very existence is baffling, and the LEGO of it all is never entirely justified, but as an unconventional documentary of a maverick musician, it works — just about.

also out

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REVIEWS IN FULL



MY OLD ASS

★★★★ FILM

"It is essentially a hang-out movie. Smart, and sharp enough to balance the sweetness of its simple yet profound message. All we have is time, and this film reminds us, movingly, that it matters how we spend it."

HELEN O'HARA

INDUSTRY: SEASON 3

★★★★ TV

"This is the most disparate season yet — but the plot-twists, back-stabbing character drama and endlessly high stakes keep the show as gripping and raucous as ever."

SOPHIE BUTCHER

THE PLATFORM 2

★★ FILM

"It dissolves into a bloated, murky haze, never quite sure of its satirical target. At one point, it suggests it is in fact a prequel rather than a sequel, but by the end of the movie you may find you're not invested enough in the story to truly care." **TOM ELLEN**

WOMAN OF THE HOUR

★★★ FILM

"Anna Kendrick plays Cheryl Bradshaw with a determination she's rarely been allowed in the peppier roles of her career; as a director, she wrestles with big ideas with a lot of wisdom." **ELLA KEMP**

HOLD YOUR BREATH

★★ FILM

"For a debut feature, this dustbowl survival flick shows undeniable promise — but committed performances and striking cinematography can't stop a shaky narrative crumbling at the last." **MATT GLASBY**

SPINNING DOWN

AFTER THE SEISMIC SUCCESS OF *PARASITE*, BONG JOON HO HAD IT UP? THE ANSWER WAS TO LEAVE EARTH ALTOGETHER — ROBERT PATTINSON IS PITTED AGAINST HIMSELF,



THE WORLD AT HIS FEET — SO HOW ON EARTH WOULD HE FOLLOW
AND IN BONKERS SCI-FI **MICKEY 17**, IN WHICH
THE DIRECTOR TRULY GOES FOR BROKE

DOWN



WORDS
**JOHN
NUGENT**

SOME CALL IT “MOVIE MAGIC”. SOME CALL IT “MOJO”. THE FRENCH CALL IT “*JE NE SAIS QUOI*”. FOR DIRECTOR BONG JOON HO?

“BONG SAUCE”.

In Director Bong’s eighth feature film, *Mickey 17*, Toni Collette plays a character obsessed with sauce, desperate to discover a new one on a distant planet. Her character describes the condiment as “the true litmus test of a civilisation”. It provided the perfect metaphor for how the filmmaker adapted the novel the film was based on, Edward Ashton’s *Mickey7* (more on that name change later). “Edward Ashton is such a great writer,” Bong tells *Empire*, through his regular interpreter Sharon Choi. “The novel is such a great read. Basically, what I tried to do was put my strange intuition onto that story. Like the sauce that Toni Collette’s character always talks about — well, I just splashed Bong sauce on the novel.”

The world has been hungry for Bong sauce. We’ve been salivating for years. It’s been half a decade since *Parasite*, Bong’s riotous 2019 social satire, which became one of the most successful South Korean films of all time, sweeping up the Palme d’Or at Cannes and four Academy Awards (the first ever awarded to a South Korean film), including Best Director and Best Picture. A week after those Oscars, Martin Scorsese wrote Bong a letter of congratulations, told him, “Rest, but don’t rest too long” — and urged him to immediately get going on his follow-up, eager to see what his unique, idiosyncratic mind would produce next. Fans have been excitedly impatient for their next Bong-hit ever since. “I know it’s been quite a long time,” he acknowledges, “but for me, I’ve never had a day off. I just kept working, non-stop.”

Mickey 17 is the result of that work, finally arriving next year. Like Ashton’s book, it tells the futuristic story of Mickey Barnes (played in the film by Robert Pattinson), a working schlub in 2054 who signs up to be an “expendable” (not the Sylvester Stallone kind): a disposable employee for a distant colonial planet, designed to take on deadly tasks, and “reprinted” with a fresh body and the same memories whenever he dies. Then, unhelpfully, Mickey 17 — the 17th iteration of the original Mickey — doesn’t die when he’s supposed to, and Mickey 18 shows up. Suddenly, there are more Mickeys than you’d find in a Disneyland gift shop.

It’s a big deal. After 2006’s *The Host* and 2013’s *Snowpiercer*, *Mickey 17* marks Bong’s long-awaited return to science-fiction, his return to the English language — and the biggest, most ambitious production of his career so far. It is also, according to its lead actor Robert Pattinson, “absolutely insane”.

For seemingly everyone who has worked on the film, this is a point of accord.

Pattinson’s co-star, Naomi Ackie, simply says: “It’s wild. How many genres can we fit into this thing?” Her castmate, Steven Yeun, agrees: “The script was kind of this fever dream. So funny and smart. I don’t even know how to describe it. It just felt like *Bong*.”

This, then, is how Bong chose to follow up the seismic success of *Parasite* — a sci-fi comedy about an idiot who gets himself repeatedly killed. Which begs the question: what happens when you get Bong sauce everywhere?

Not even Bong knew what Bong was doing after *Parasite*. The filmmaker had at least two projects cooking before *Parasite* was even released, including a South Korea-set horror, and a story set in the UK and the US, based on a “real-life event”, which he eventually shelved due to its “ethical” implications. “And it was then,” he says, “that *Mickey7* just fell in my lap.”

Shrugging off any suggestion that this is his big response to all those Oscars — “It



was great that *Parasite* was received so well internationally, but my next film really didn’t have much to do with the aftermath,” he asserts — the manuscript for *Mickey7* was sent to the director by producers Jeremy Kleiner and Dede Gardner before the novel was even published. “They found it unique and strange,” he explains with a smile. “So naturally, they ended up tossing it to me.”

Bong was instantly intrigued. Here was a chance to play in a science-fiction sandpit again

— and with it, the chance to explore his favourite themes. “It’s definitely a genre that I love,” he acknowledges. “For me, the biggest joy with sci-fi is that you’re able to talk about the human condition in quite a bold and irreverent way. I’m really not interested in big, fancy spaceships or laser beams.”

While *Mickey 17* does tangentially include one big, fancy spaceship, the film is, Bong states, “the most human story” he has ever made — warts and all. “Ultimately, the story





**Clockwise
from main:**
Expendable
Mickey Barnes/
Mickey 17
(Robert Pattinson)
confronts Mickey
18 (Pattinson);
Director Bong
Joon Ho (right)
on set; Mickey
gets a reprint
and a new life;
Villains Kenneth
Marshall (Mark
Ruffalo) and Ylfa
(Toni Collette).



is about how pathetic humans can be," he says. "It's almost like you can smell every human character in the film — their piss stains and their smelly socks."

There is appeal in piss stains here. In Ashton's novel, Bong found a way to tell another story about inequality, capitalism, and authoritarian structures that need dismantling — in a very eccentric, Bong Joon Ho sort of way. What kind of nightmarish world would create a system

where you might willingly kill someone, over and over again? "I was quite immediately hooked," he says. The Bong sauce quickly began to flow.

Much of the film remains faithful to the novel: as in the book, it is set in the distant future, on the ice planet of Niflheim, where an expedition of humans are attempting to colonise its inhospitable climate, with the aid of expendable technology. But some elements are very different. The aliens that the humans

encounter on the planet, the 'creepers', play a much bigger role, for one thing. "I really wanted to accentuate the dignity that the creepers carry as the indigenous creatures of this planet," Bong explains. "So I strengthened their presence in the film." (Ackie got to keep a puppet version of one of the creepers as a wrap gift. "It's on my shelf at home," she says. "Everyone comes round and says, 'What is that?'")

There are other changes. In the book, the antagonist, Marshall, is simply a grumpy military bureaucrat. In the film, he's a deranged, peroxide-toothed politician played by Mark Ruffalo, joined by his equally insane wife, the aforementioned sauce-fan Ylfa, played by Collette. "They're quite silly," giggles

Bong of his villains, who he says are partly inspired by real-life dictators. “I think that follows the irreverent tone of this film. They are dictators with a lot of flaws — but those flaws are actually what makes them more dangerous.” Obsessed with his own popularity, Marshall hosts a talk show for the residents of Niflheim, ‘Tonight With Kenneth Marshall’, and employs a man in a pigeon costume, played by comedian Tim Key. (After the trailer for the film was released, the book’s author Edward Ashton wrote a baffled post on X: “Not for nothing, but who the hell is the guy in the bird suit??”)

The character of Berto in the book, Mickey’s supposed best friend, has evolved too, becoming Yeun’s Timo. “Timo occupies this in-between space,” explains Yeun. “He kind of acts as this bridge between the overworld and underworld.” But the biggest change Bong made to Ashton’s novel was to the title — from *Mickey7* to *Mickey 17*. Poor, hapless Mickey dies ten more times in this version of the story, “reprinted” even more after his deadly tasks, from radiation-heavy spacewalks to being a literal crash test dummy.

The extra deaths are not just sadism on the director’s part — “I know I’ve created serial-killer movies (referring to his 2003 thriller *Memories Of Murder*), but I’m not that pervert guy!” he promises — rather, an opportunity to magnify the key ideas. “It’s Mickey’s job to die,” Bong explains. “Dying is like clocking into work every day. I changed it to 17 to enhance the drudgery of his everyday job — the working-class aspect of his life.” To become an expendable, you’d have to be pretty desperate. And Mickey — who is escaping massive debts, and an Earth seemingly collapsing from environmental disaster — is desperate.

The ingredients were all in place. The sauce was starting to simmer. Now the director simply needed his Mickey. “I was looking for an actor who had this goofy, endearing feel,” Bong explains on his casting hunt, using the word “goofy” in English here, “while also feeling like a wild beast. Kind of crazy.” He giggles again. “When I was looking for all these qualities in one man, I immediately thought of Robert.”

It was in Robert Pattinson, finally, that Bong Joon Ho found someone who could match his freak.

It is a matter of public record that Robert Pattinson loves to go weird. In the years since abandoning his *Twilight* teen-heartthrob status, he has embraced the offbeat. He reportedly once told his agent, in fact, that he only wanted to play “total freaks”. So when the role of Mickey Barnes came along — described by producers in their early conversations to Pattinson as “an impossible part”, he recalls — his interest was significantly piqued. “As soon as they said that,” he says with a mischievous grin, “I was like: ‘Ooooh! An impossible part, you say?’”

It would not be easy. Not only would



Clockwise from
above left:
Mickey’s mate
Timo (Steven
Yeun); Mickey
finds one
scenario
unpalatable; With
love interest
Nasha (Naomi
Ackie); Ready for
a dangerous
mission; Ackie
and Bong having
fun on set.





“ULTIMATELY, THE STORY IS ABOUT HOW PATHETIC HUMANS CAN BE.”

BONG JOON HO

the actor have to play Mickey 17, an oddball loser despised by characters in the film as a “goddamned print job”, he would also have to play Mickey 18, his near-psychopathic variant, a “mutant Mickey”, as the director labels him. These two Robert Pattinsons come face-to-face, interact, pass objects to one another, fight, even at one point consider an unwise sexual encounter. Pattinson famously hates watching his own performances — how did he feel watching a *double* performance?

“It’s not so bad,” he says. “It’s funny to see when certain scenes work, because when you’re doing it, you’re like, ‘There’s no way that this is going to look like I’m reacting to myself at all.’ It just feels very disjointed. To see it actually work is fascinating.”

Using a clever mix of body doubles and CGI, the effect is “seamless”, says Ackie. “We were well prepared for it. It just took a bit longer. With Director Bong, every single frame is completely thought through.” Yeun shrugs off the challenge of two Robert Pattinsons: “Well, I only got to work with one Robert Pattinson,” he says. “So I was fine.” (Bong is reluctant to give away too much about how the effect was achieved. “You know, I had silly ideas of lying during interviews,” he laughs, “and revealing that Robert Pattinson was actually a set of identical twins.”)

For Pattinson, the trickiest challenge was modulating his performance between 17 and 18, often on the same day. “It’s not like we shot one character first and then the other one. We were switching between the two characters constantly.” Though the Mickeys are almost genetically identical, there are some subtle differences. “We tried all these different make-up things to differentiate them at first,” Pattinson recalls. “We just ended up with this one tiny little snaggle on 18’s tooth. It’s barely noticeable, but there was something about it that made you move your mouth slightly differently.”

He also modulated his voice. We should probably talk about the voice. The internet has already talked about the voice quite a lot. (“Robert Pattinson Is Doing Another Weird Voice In ‘Mickey 17’ And Everyone Loves It”, ran one headline.) “My initial idea was to do impressions of Steve-O and Johnny Knoxville [from *Jackass*],” says Pattinson, chuckling to himself. “I love Steve-O’s voice. We did it on the first read-through. And Bong was like, ‘That voice sounds like



nails on a chalkboard.' I was like, 'Is that a good thing?' He was like, 'No.'"

The strange, weaselly East Coast accent he ultimately landed on was an "amalgamation" of many things. "It's a little like Stimpy," he says, referring to the cult '90s cartoon *Ren & Stimpy*. "When 18 comes in, it's a little bit more like Ren." The idea, he explains, was to find the combination of pitilessness and fury in the characters. "I just had this idea that he's kind of like a dog with a complete lack of self-worth. He just keeps turning up, reporting for duty. But then I hope the reveal is that it's a combination of deep, misguided guilt, and also survival. It's him just saying, 'I'll just keep lowering my expectations the whole time.'"

These Mickeys are quite different from those in the book. Bong's script turns Mickey from a "sardonic historian", as Pattinson calls him, into an awkward, rodent-y nonentity. Most protagonists in genre films of this kind "have something innately heroic about them", argues Pattinson. "[With Mickey], it's sort of like if Arthur gets the sword out of the stone, he doesn't learn anything, puts the sword back in the stone, and goes, 'Oh, thank God that's over.'"

This guy, it's fair to say, is no Batman. For Pattinson, it was an opportunity to try something completely different from anything he'd done before. "It's why I want to do any movie," he says. He cites in particular *Memories Of Murder* — which sees an ensemble of detectives frequently land absurd dropkicks on one another — as a big influence. "It's one of my favourite movies," he says. "I was always thinking I'd love to do something like that.

It has this really unusual style, where

all the characters make these incredibly unexpected choices, but it never seems self-conscious. When they have the motif of the flying kicks, it never feels like he's trying to be random."

Director and star had a mutual respect. Bong "really loved Rob's recent works", he says, especially his "reserved performance in *Tenet*" and his "explosive energy in *The Lighthouse*. So I already had a lot of trust in him as an actor." He immediately saw that energy manifest in front of him. Pattinson is "an actor that obsessively delves into his projects", Bong says. "He just started chewing on this project and character. It was kind of like watching a beast go after his prey."

It was a beast he had to be willing to let go, too, multiple times, dying on screen over and over again. These moments are classic Bong: a dark blend of morbid humour and genuine humanity. "The point is that you feel sorry for the guy," Bong explains, "and the many various ways in which he dies. They're all kind of funny, but you feel *bad* finding it funny." It's a delicate path to tread. "It's quite brutal," agrees Pattinson. "The line between comedy and horror is quite thin. That's Bong's style in a lot of ways. He's making a statement about a corporation or government's lack of empathy towards an individual. There's a scene where I'm coughing up blood in a containment tank, and even when I was doing it, I was like: 'Wow, this is horrendous!'"

It's in Ackie's character, Mickey's main squeeze Nasha, that Bong manages to thread the needle between those tones. "There is tenderness there," she notes, pointing out a scene in which Nasha quietly holds Mickey in a hazmat suit while he is slowly gassed to death,



**"THE TWO MICKEYS
SOUND A LITTLE LIKE
REN AND STIMPY."**

**ROBERT
PATTINSON**

in the search for a vaccine against the alien planet. "She feels like the heart of the film — the message of the film is to just fucking love people and respect them, regardless of where their station is." In among the sci-fi craziness and cartoon voices, there is a yearning in *Mickey 17* for us to honour the dignity of life — human, creeper, or goddamned print jobs alike.



Clockwise from far left: A mass of furry 'creepers' assemble on the ice planet of Niflheim; Yeun is in the driving seat; Pattinson and Bong get on with the paperwork.

When *Empire* speaks to Bong over Zoom, it is a few days after his 55th birthday. We ask what he did to celebrate. He offers an apologetic chuckle. "I just had a day where I got to confirm, once again, that I am a middle-aged man," he says with a weary smile. "I always want to stay a young filmmaker."

Nobody enjoys getting old, not even Oscar-winning directors. But perhaps immortality — at least the version of immortality offered here — is not especially appealing, either. "In most sci-fi films and fantasy stories," Bong says, "eternal life is treated as something sublime, spiritual, profound. I was really captivated by the idea that human printing is not respectful at all. You're literally reproducing humans like an inkjet printer."

Pattinson briefly considers if he would ever take the opportunity to be reprinted. "I mean, probably not," he says. "I love the description of the process of reprinting, when they first describe it to Mickey: they're like, 'Yeah, so basically, you're going to be made out of human excrement and chicken bones and trash.'" Death, the cast and crew agree, is a useful motivator for life. "Part of the reason why life is so precious and important is because we have to constantly analyse and reanalyse," says Ackie. "What are we doing with the time that we have if you start to take that away?"

There is one line in the film that Yeun keeps coming back to, a line heard in the trailer: "What does it feel like to die?" "I really pinged on that question," Yeun says. "I think there's something interesting in there about what it means to make a new world. If you are pioneers and you do want to make

something more, what is that going to take?"

As a cinematic pioneer, it's a question Bong has asked himself. *Mickey 17* is not an obvious or easy follow-up to a universally beloved film like *Parasite*: it is kooky and bewildering and filled with a very specific sense of humour. Rumours abounded online, especially when its original 2024 release date was pushed back by a year, that this oddness may have led to a tussle on the final cut of the film — rumours Bong is happy to dispel.

"With *Okja* and now *Mickey 17*, I was given the final cut as part of my deal," he explains. "The studio respected my final cut rights. Of course, during the editing process there are many opinions and many discussions that happen. But this film is my cut, and I'm very happy about it. It was a long process, but it was always smooth and respectful." After a torrid experience with the notorious Harvey Weinstein on the international release of *Snowpiercer*, Bong is perhaps no longer willing to take any chances. Pattinson is thrilled. "It's really cool that a studio has done this film, and that Bong pushed to have the final cut on it — to make something that does feel incredibly unusual."

If there's one thing that will stay immortal, Yeun argues, it's the film itself. "All of Bong's films are evergreen," he says. "They keep evolving over time. If you're open to it, it'll take you on a weird, mind-opening ride. Maybe you'll struggle with it for a while, but perhaps it'll come back to you in a year or two or ten, and it'll speak to you differently. Bong leaves things to the chaos. And I love that about him."

The Bong sauce can be an acquired taste for some — but it stays fresh, long after it has splashed everywhere. 🍷

MICKEY 17 IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 JANUARY

DOUBLING UP

EVERY ACTOR'S DREAM CO-STAR? THEMSELVES



MOON

In Duncan Jones' moody sci-fi, Sam Rockwell's solitary astronaut Sam finally finds some company, in the form of... himself. Is it a clone? Or is *Sam* the clone? The pair then have the mother of existential arguments. "I'm the original Sam! I'm Sam fucking Bell! Me!"



MULTIPLICITY

Ever feel like you could do with, well, more *you*? In Harold Ramis' 1996 comedy, Michael Keaton's Doug Kinney has a machine churn out three clones. They're not quite the full picnic, especially Lenny, who keeps calling Doug 'Steve'. Doug stops cloning after that one.



ORPHAN BLACK

Tatiana Maslany's con-artist Sarah Manning meets her match 276 times in this musing on the ethics of cloning. Maslany played 17 iterations, from headstrong Sarah to maniac Helena. Like all great sci-fi, this TV show examines humanity without pulling punches.



ANT-MAN AND THE WASP: QUANTUMANIA

We always knew that there were myriad variants of Jonathan Majors' Kang The Conqueror. And in *Quantumania*'s mid-credits scene we saw a whole legion of countless Kangs, jumping up and down with glee, raring to go, ready to rule the multiverse. We'd never see them again. **ALEX GODFREY**



THE FUTURE OF CINEMA

NEARLY 130 YEARS SINCE THE LUMIÈRE BROTHERS INVENTED CINEMA, HERE WE ARE, WITH HOLLYWOOD TRANSFORMING BY THE DAY, STREAMING CHANGING THE GAME, AND AI LOOMING LARGE. WITH THE INDUSTRY MORE EXCITING — BUT MORE UNPREDICTABLE — THAN EVER BEFORE, WE ASK BLOCKBUSTER FILMMAKERS AND INDIE DIRECTORS ALIKE HOW THEY'RE FEELING... AND WHAT'S IN STORE



JACEY



Mikey Madison (centre) shines in Sean Baker's *Anora*.



GEORGE MILLER

The Mad Max saga, *Happy Feet*, *Babe: Pig In The City*

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Darwinian.

What was the last new film to blow you away?

Anora.

The rise of streaming —

blessing or curse?

The way we receive content is always evolving. It depends on how we adapt to its potentials and contradictions.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

We are hard-wired to

gather in the sharing of stories. I believe cinemas are, for the most part, doing everything they can...

What's your take on AI?

Yet another powerful new tool. Question is, can we be clear-sighted and ethical in the way we use it?

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

The comprehensively skilled, self-starting storytellers who have already figured out how to engage audiences on multimedia platforms.



Katy O'Brian and Kristen Stewart fall hard in Rose Glass' *Love Lies Bleeding*.



JEREMY SAULNIER

Rebel Ridge, *Green Room*, *Blue Ruin*

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Reinvigorated.

What was the last new film to blow you away?

The Thing (1982). Not new, of course. I'd seen the film dozens of times (among my top five faves) on VHS home video and a beat-up

print from the '80s. But seeing a pristine print of John Carpenter's classic on the big screen (*The Egyptian in Hollywood*) was like seeing it for the first time. I caught myself wondering as it played, "What the hell are we even doing if this film from 40-plus years ago blows just about everything else away?" Not to discount the

amazing films being made by my contemporaries (*Love Lies Bleeding* comes to mind), but it just seems that all the new technology pushed on filmmakers from script to screen ends up adding layers and layers of needless veneer atop what was already near-perfect.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

Neither. Streaming is a technology that's replacing the way most of us experience home viewing. Sure, I dig physical media and prefer to have my own curated collection on a shelf. But whether it's paying bills, buying groceries, or chatting with friends, everything is moving online — good luck trying to stop that train. Home video isn't the downfall of the theatrical experience — historically it's actually kept it afloat as a hedge against box-office failures. Because the *real* money is in licensing titles

to ancillary markets. And when those licences expire, the titles are licensed again. And again. There's great value in building libraries. And that's where streaming as a *business model* gets dicey. Especially if everyone's doing it. Now every studio is funnelling their own titles to in-house streaming services. Those lucrative licensing fees gave way to a total and continued dependence on subscription, which means cutting costs for 'content'. More importantly, it hurts artists. Residual payments from ancillary markets are what kept authors and creators afloat with shares of all that money changing hands. If you take that away, it's not a healthy business model. So I guess the real curse is corporate consolidation.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

For general audiences?



Here and below right: Multiversal madness in Daniels' *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. **Middle and bottom:** Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things*.

Who knows. Trap doors that open up and swallow shitheads who pull out their cellphones during the show? One goofball can spoil the experience for an entire audience, so I guess it's just weeding out those who think they can privatise our public space. I recently relocated to Los Angeles and I'm happy to report that the moviegoing experience here couldn't be more enticing. Great programming, great crowds, and deep respect for both highbrow and lowbrow cinemagoing. I joined the American Cinematheque and definitely found my tribe.

What's your take on AI? I fell in love with filmmaking because it presents the unique opportunity to interweave disparate crafts in pursuit of a single artistic endeavour — which is then shared and celebrated with

an audience. Hard to beat that. A film's inspiration can be deeply personal but its creation requires collective effort. And its exhibition, if successful, creates community. It's a very human experience. On set, I like rolling up my sleeves, kicking up dirt and spraying Karo Syrup blood all over the place. Even if I could achieve the exact same imagery alone in my office with a computer, I wouldn't. Film sets are electric because they are inhabited by living, breathing people with experience and ideas that, from time to time, are able to catch lightning in a bottle. Fuck all that fake shit because, you know — for me? The action *is* the juice.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'. Someone who's reading this, getting ready to take their shot.



FEDE ALVAREZ

Alien: Romulus, Don't Breathe, Evil Dead

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema? Struggle.

What was the last new film to blow you away? *Everything Everywhere All At Once*.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse? A curse for theatres.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing? Get closer to IMAX in quality.

What's your take on AI? It's here to stay whether we like it or not. And I hope it cures cancer and brings

blessings to humanity, to compensate for the damage that it will create in some other fields.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'. Daniels, Josh and Benny Safdie, Yorgos Lanthimos, Jordan Peele, Luca Guadagnino. >





Animal magic: Mike Cheslik's *Hundreds Of Beavers*. **Top right:** S.S. Rajamouli's audacious *RRR*.

DANIEL SCHEINERT

Everything Everywhere All At Once, Swiss Army Man



What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

"Uhhhidunno..."

What was the last new film to blow you away?

SING SING!!!!

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

A blessed curse full of blessings that have cursed us! I mean, I love when finance and tech bros try to 'innovate' or 'disrupt' an industry and chunks of that trickle down to interesting artists and their work gets made and gets out there. Hey, algorithms made my career possible. So, bless *Squid Game*, *How To With John Wilson*, *Baby Reindeer*!

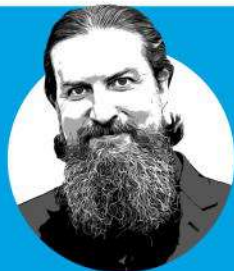
Curse [Warner Bros.' David] Zaslav and the anti-*Coyote* Vs. *Acme* accountants.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

Make theatres celebratory, social spaces that do more than shuffle you in and out and charge lots for popcorn. Encourage community. I LOVE when folks dress up for *Barbie*, or dance at *RRR*, or sit and chat for hours over a beer after seeing (and reading about) *It Ends With Us*, or scream at the screen about how heartbreak feels so fucking good in a place like this.

What's your take on AI?

A lot of smart people want to use it to make the world



ADAM WINGARD

Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire, The Guest, You're Next

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Defenestrated.

What was the last new film to blow you away?

Furiosa. I found myself blown away by how much I loved it.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

Both. I've contributed to either side and I'll always be

Wingard's winner: Anya Taylor-Joy in George Miller's *Furiosa*.



in favour of the cinemas by a long shot, both as a filmmaker and fan. However, I can't deny the great opportunities that streaming provides. When I made *The Guest* back in 2013 it came out at the tail-end of the video market and streaming hadn't quite kicked in, so that film never really reached the audience that it should have despite it being the best picture I've

directed to date. If we released *The Guest* now, with streaming culture as it is, I believe it would be a much bigger deal.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

More emphasis on IMAX and Dolby Vision. Giving the audience a premium experience they can't get at home.

distracting blink. On the flip side, the main fear I have is that AI will make us lazy and dehumanise the whole process. Because of this, I think ten years from now the industry is going to be completely different in both good and bad ways that we can't even predict. Ultimately, AI is going to make us re-evaluate what filmmaking and cinema mean to us.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

Chris Nolan is, and will continue to be, the most important figure in cinema because of his commitment to analogue/old-school filmmaking. He reminds us that when the audience can trust that pretty much everything we are seeing on screen is real and photographed in-camera, it truly does have a massive impact on the viewing experience; that the most important thing about cinema is human creativity.



a better place and I wish those people the absolute best, but I personally don't trust the billionaires racing to deploy it everywhere first, and think that shit is disturbing, dangerous, and might destroy the world as we know it.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

Check out A24 and Neon and Focus Features' lowest-grossing movies last year. I think there are hundreds of artists out there who made a so-called 'flop' movie who will surprise us all, and change our lives,

and become the future of cinema (if our industry can be creative and forgiving enough to let folks experiment and make a few mistakes along the way). These folks didn't make flops but they made indie movies I loved last year: Savannah Leaf, Zachary Wigton, Daniel Goldhaber. Oh wait, I have a new answer: Mike Cheslik and the team behind *Hundreds Of Beavers*. That movie is the key to making theatres fun, and is the future of cinema, and blew me away, and I'd like to start over and say the word that comes to mind is BEAVERS.

GINA PRINCE-BYTHEWOOD

The Woman King, The Old Guard, Love And Basketball



What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Necessary.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

Both. Streaming has absolutely opened up the cinematic landscape to filmmakers who have unique stories to tell. But it has also fostered a narrative that films only deserve [a] theatrical [release] if they can be eventised.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

Mirror the Arclight experience by making it feel special and fun. Clean

venues. Great concessions. Greeters introducing the film. Lose the endless commercials.

What's your take on AI?

It is not creative. It just takes from others' creativity.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

The future of cinema are the voices that have been excluded from cinema. That is where you will find fresh, unique stories about characters and worlds we have not yet seen. ➤



ON THE MONEY

LAST YEAR, JAPAN'S *GODZILLA MINUS ONE* PROVED THAT JAW-DROPPING EFFECTS DON'T HAVE TO COST \$200 MILLION. CAN HOLLYWOOD FOLLOW SUIT?

"THIS IS MY entire team behind me," laughs Takashi Yamazaki over Zoom, gesturing at the ten or so people in his small Tokyo office. The director is explaining how his 2023 epic *Godzilla Minus One* — made for just \$15 million — managed to beat the \$200-million-plus likes of *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 3* and *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One* to the Oscar for Best Visual Effects earlier this year. And, apparently, the film's skeleton crew was a major factor.

"A small team is key," Yamazaki explains. "[I have] heard that in Hollywood the process to check [VFX] material can be quite complicated — artists must create multiple options, so filmmakers can choose between them. That takes time and [requires] more people working. With a small team, checking and reviewing is quicker." The fact that Yamazaki is both director and VFX supervisor further streamlines proceedings. And while he's insistent that "for a Japanese film, [a \$15 million] budget isn't that small," his city-pulverising lizard still looks far slicker than much of what Hollywood is currently achieving for double or triple the price.

Godzilla Minus One — along with fellow 2023 Oscar nominee *The Creator* — is part of a new wave of movies taking a more inventive approach to visual effects, and producing jaw-dropping results for considerably less cash. *The Creator's* director Gareth Edwards — who also has roots in VFX — made the bold decision to shoot his 2023 futuristic thriller in real locations (mainly Thailand), and layer sci-fi elements into the background afterwards. "You normally design [blockbusters] to death, and spend a fortune on concept art and set-building," Edwards told *Empire* last year. "But I wanted realism, and I was adamant it would be far cheaper to just buy plane tickets to the best places on Earth — if we kept the [team] small. I wanted a movie that wouldn't cost the same as a blockbuster, but would look equal to one. Or bigger."

Anyone who's seen *The Creator* will know Edwards achieved this. For Yamazaki, too, VFX should be worked into a film in a clear and positive way during pre-production, rather



Top to bottom: Rampant destruction in *Godzilla Minus One*; An early rendering of the scene; Fleshing out the detail; Madeleine Yuna Voyles in *The Creator*.

than used later as a costly Band-Aid. During development on *Godzilla Minus One*, the director learned one of his team was tinkering with water-based effects "as a hobby". He then built more aquatic scenes into script: "I thought, 'If [the artist] is so good with water, he'll have good motivation to use it in the film.'"

Whether Hollywood will take note of these films' leaner VFX approach remains to be seen. But Yamazaki's Oscar triumph suggests it might be wise to do so. "Coming from Japanese VFX, you never imagine you can win an Oscar," he laughs. "I hope it will encourage people outside Hollywood to achieve higher levels of art, now that the Oscars have proved they're open to great work from anywhere." The future looks brighter than a blast of Godzilla's laser breath. **TOM ELLEN**





TODD PHILLIPS

Joker: Folie À Deux, Joker, The Hangover 1-3

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Critical.

What was the last new film to blow you away?

Kinds Of Kindness. Yorgos Lanthimos is doing some of the most exciting and original work out there. His partnership with Emma Stone feels meant to be. And Jesse Plemons always delivers. I loved every cold-hearted minute of it.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

Streaming has been an absolute blessing for TV shows and limited series. Whether it's originals like *Stranger Things* or *Black Mirror* or breathing new life into *Breaking Bad* and *Fargo*, streaming has served that side of the business incredibly well. However,

I don't think it works the same for films. The movies have always been a business that attracts gamblers. The filmmakers, the studios and the exhibitors. We're all gambling, when you think about it. Spending time and money — and hoping we have something the public will turn up for. That's the sweat. And gamblers love the sweat. Streaming has removed the sweat from releasing a film. There's nothing quite like that opening-weekend panic — will they show up? Will they respond? Can we stick around and play for four or five weeks? It feels like the streaming services have taken all the risk away — and with that, some of the magic. But maybe that's just 'cause I'm a degenerate gambler.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?
Stop showing commercials

before the movies. We've paid for our tickets. We're excited to be there. The commercials tend to take the air out of the room. We're struggling to get people out of their houses, to differentiate the experience they have at home — showing commercials is not helping.

What's your take on AI?

Honestly, I don't know enough about it to have a properly formed "take", but it seems like it's a double-edged sword. For me, the best films tend to feel "hand-made" — not sure how that authenticity is reconciled with AI.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

Josh Safdie. Benny Safdie. Alice Rohrwacher. Jordan Peele.



Lanthimos muse
Emma Stone in *Kinds Of Kindness*.



JEFF NICHOLS

The Bikeriders, Loving, Mud, Take Shelter

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Resilient or precious.

What was the last new film to blow you away?

Godzilla Minus One. I saw this film on an IMAX screen, and I found it completely immersive. This feeling is why I got into making films in the first place, and I hadn't



Ticket to ride:
Dakota Johnson
in Christy Hall's
Daddio.

experienced it in a theatre in a very long time.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?
Meh, maybe the wrong question. The real concern here is curation. Early streaming services were

built on a model that wanted to disrupt home video release schedules. They overachieved in their goals and actually broke a thing that didn't need to be broken, the theatrical experience. However, they've also broken

traditional TV programming with the amount of content they offer. At the end of the day, people want guidance on what to watch, and the algorithms miss the point. We don't want choices gleaned from past viewing habits. We want to

be exposed to great material made by thoughtful people and selected by people that are paying attention. With streaming, I think we are looking at a technology in its infancy. It will get better. It has to, or it will become irrelevant.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

Scale. I think every screen should be IMAX. It's silly that only giant movies are released in this scale. Emotionality can actually deliver at this scale better than action. See my answer to the second question.

What's your take on AI?

It's a tool. Learn it and use it.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

Michael Schwartz (*The Peanut Butter Falcon* and *Los Frikis*). Christy Hall (*Daddio*).



Wang Bing's
Youth (Spring).



LUCA GUADAGNINO

Challengers, Bones And All, Call Me By Your Name

What was the last new film to blow you away?
Rewatch last night of Jean Renoir's *La Règle Du Jeu*.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing

more enticing?
Take big risks and empower the intelligence of the audiences with thought-provoking endeavours.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.
Wang Bing, Giovanni Tortorici, Mati Diop.

SOFIA COPPOLA

Priscilla, Marie Antoinette, Lost In Translation, The Virgin Suicides



What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?
Hope.

What was the last new film to blow you away?
The Zone Of Interest.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?
I think it's made it hard for independent films and uniqueness. Algorithms don't support things that are different.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?
I think screening them in a nice place you want to go — London has great theatres with bars and places to hang out and talk. We don't have that in the US that much.

What's your take on AI?
I think it can be helpful, but I think you need a heart and soul to make art.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.
I look at my kids and their friends editing videos on their phones with ease and in an impressive way, and will be curious to see what their generation makes. >



Here and below:
Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone Of Interest*.





REINALDO MARCUS GREEN

Bob Marley: One Love, King Richard, Monsters And Men

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Boundless.

What was the last new film to blow you away?

Anatomy Of A Fall (Justine Triet).

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

Blessing.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

I can only speak now as a family of four, but it's relatively the same cost as going to Disneyland for the day. I would look at pricing holistically. Also flexibility of screening

times would help. I find screening times less and less reflective of society's flex schedules and work-from-home hours — with our new norms I think cinemas are a tad behind the times.

What's your take on AI?

AI isn't new. As is the premise of *Moneyball*, it's adapt or die.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

Too many to count. But a few names that inspire me personally: Rashaad Ernesto Green, Ryan Coogler, Barry Jenkins, Shaka King, A.V. Rockwell, Charlotte Wells.



Clockwise from main:

Justine Triet's *Anatomy Of A Fall*; Ryan Coogler's upcoming *Sinners*; Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun*.



PAUL FEIG

Jackpot!, The Heat, Bridesmaids

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Evolving. Audiences have different levels of sophistication now and aren't swayed by mere visual spectacle anymore since they've seen pretty much everything thanks to CGI, and so we have to keep rethinking how we're going to surprise and dazzle them. To me, this means we have to emotionally dazzle them with unexpected

High-velocity action in Nida Manzoor's *Polite Society*. Right: Halina Reijn's *Bodies Bodies Bodies*.





GURINDER CHADHA

Blinded By The Light, Viceroy's House, Bend It Like Beckham



Will Ferrell and Harper Steele in *Will & Harper*.

What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Perseverance.

What was the last new film to blow you away?
Will & Harper.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

Mixed blessing!

Storytelling is storytelling but some films need to be seen on a big screen.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing

more enticing?
Be affordable for families.

What's your take on AI?

Scary but inevitable. We have to harness its positives and make them work for us writers and filmmakers. I do believe AI cannot replicate emotional depth in the way screenwriters can.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

Constantly looking for them, filmmakers that embrace diversity and cinematic language while showing us a window on the world and our souls.

characters and stories and plot-twists and fresh voices, which can then be supported by as big or little VFX and imagery as enhances the storytelling.

What was the last new film to blow you away?

Abigail. It was a total maximalist thrill-ride, funny, scary and over-the-top in the best way possible.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

A blessing for filmmakers who simply want to get their movies made. We'd all love to be making theatrical films with big releases but with the studios cutting back on their output, the streamers have really stepped up to let us tell our stories with real budgets. As much as we miss having audiences experience our films as a group in a theatre, the fact is that more people will see our movies on a streaming platform where it's much



easier to get them to click on the title than get them into their cars and to the cineplex. Nothing will ever replace the theatrical experience, but it's more important to get movies made than not.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

More comfortable seats, but get rid of reclining chairs and food service during the film. There needs to be a difference between watching a movie at home and in a theatre with other people. They could also check people's phones at the door — try

and eliminate as many distractions as possible.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

Nida Manzoor (*Polite Society*) because of her willingness to go big and go fun and funny while still finding the heart and emotion, Scott Mann (*Fall*) for creating insanely high tension and drama, Fawzia Mirza (*The Queen Of My Dreams*) for making a heartfelt family dramedy that has so many layers, and Halina Reijn (*Bodies Bodies Bodies*) for walking the line between outrageous comedy, tense thrills and hilarious twists.



NEXT LEVEL

AFTER DECADES OF REVOLUTIONISING FILMMAKING, WE ASK WHAT'S IN STORE FOR VFX

FIRST IT WAS confined to hard surfaces and solid objects; then it conquered water and fire; then fully-CG characters became a feasible, convincing option. Today, there is little that the VFX industry can't do with enough time and money.

The problem is finding both. Photo-realistic people were a final frontier for years, but even that is now achievable, at least with a big budget and in short bursts. Think the blend of Alyla Browne and Anya Taylor-Joy as the young Furiosa, or the de-ageing of Tom Hanks in Robert Zemeckis' upcoming *Here* (both AI-assisted). "Digital humans work fine if they're not doing much — looking moody and soulful is way easier than delivering *Henry V*'s St Crispin's Day speech," says Paul Franklin, a two-time Oscar-winner for his VFX work and one of the founders of London-based VFX giant DNEG. "But getting a completely rounded emotional performance from a completely synthetic digital human is still a way off."

Franklin also thinks that traditional motion-capture suits, with all their reflective dots and reference points, will disappear in the next few years, because machine learning can capture 3D movement from normal video images. James Cameron managed underwater performance-capture, at considerable expense, for *Avatar: The Way Of Water*, so this could bring his budgets down to under the GDP of many countries. Many traditional VFX jobs and processes, in fact, may be replaced by AI. But eventually there could be an artistic pay-off to this turmoil.

"Just as the power of computers unleashed an era of epic filmmaking — think of the vast armies in *The Lord Of The Rings* movies, or the wondrous beauty of Pandora's forests, or even my own trip into a supermassive black hole [for *Interstellar*] — I genuinely believe that AI will enable artists and filmmakers to tell stories without limits," says Franklin. "I don't know what these will be yet, but I'm sure that they're coming." For the foreseeable, we'll still have St Crispin's Day. **HELEN O'HARA**



Holding back the years: Tom Hanks and Robin Wright have been de-aged by AI for Robert Zemeckis' upcoming *Here*.

COLIN TREVORROW

Jurassic World: Dominion, Safety Not Guaranteed



What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

I want to stay optimistic. Let's go with "patience".

What was the last new film to blow you away?

The last *Spider-Verse* film. I loved the first one, but there were huge ideas in the second film that knocked me sideways. I get fired up when writers and filmmakers find a new angle on stories we've known so long. The way they broke down the commonalities in all Spider-Man stories and made that a narrative unto itself — incredible. I felt the same way about *Joker* — reframing Arthur Fleck as the potential secret son of Thomas Wayne was awesome. I literally stand up in the theatre when filmmakers take big swings and connect. I'll act like I'm at a football game — my kids will be like, "Dude,

please sit down." I know the industry is in dire straits, but our best work is not behind us. Some of the best filmmaking I've ever seen came out in the last five years. *Portrait Of A Lady On Fire*. *Oppenheimer*. *1917*. These are extraordinary pieces of work. It's not over.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?

I think streaming has given the audience an all-access pass to film history in a way that no generation before could have imagined. You can pretty much access the entire scope of cinema history in a few clicks. That's extraordinary. I know there's a much bigger conversation raging about streaming versus theatrical, and it's an important one, but it's worth celebrating that streaming has enabled us to enjoy film the way we get to enjoy music — completely and holistically as an art form.



What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?

I feel like a lot of complaints I hear about the cinematic experience aren't necessarily the fault of cinemas. It's hard to police people spending half the movie on their phone. I've been to plays in London where the person in front of me was on their phone — I'm not blaming live theatre for that. I do think people would go to the movies more if they had more options, but time and

again the movies we used to go see in theatres are opening to numbers that can't support their budgets. It's a vicious circle.

What's your take on AI?

I'm... not going to say anything negative about AI. It is listening.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.

The future of cinema is anyone willing to take a risk. Emma Seligman is

a very cool filmmaker. I love Cooper Raiff's stuff. The next generation is finding their audience, even in a climate that is challenging for independent film. I also think there will be some major steps forward when the kids who grew up on immersive video-game narratives start bringing the two mediums closer together, experimenting with passive and interactive storytelling. The future of cinema is exciting if you don't limit it to cinema as we know it today.



Seeing red: Karlía Sofía Gascón and Zoe Saldña in Jacques Audiard's *Emilia Pérez*.



"Huge ideas":
Spider-Man: Across
The Spider-Verse.
Below: Emma
Seligman's
Bottoms.



CHINONYE CHUKWU

Till, Clemency



What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?
Transitioning.

What was the last new film to blow you away?
Emilia Pérez.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?
It's all part of the transition that cinema is presently navigating.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing

more enticing?
I'm not sure if I would put the burden on cinemas.

What's your take on AI?
It should be used ethically and with the full consent of creatives, if used at all.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.
Danielle Deadwyler (star of *Till*). Alana Mayo (President of Orion Pictures). Channing Godfrey Peoples (*Miss Juneteenth*).

Catherine Breillat's
Last Summer.
Bottom: Joanna
Arnow's *The Feeling
That The Time For
Doing Something
Has Passed*.



SEAN BAKER

Anora, Red Rocket, The Florida Project, Tangerine



What is one word that comes to mind when you consider the state of cinema?

Distressing. I want to say hopeful, but I'm a little distressed. We have streamers that are not taking into consideration how filmmakers might want their films exhibited, and they are directly hurting the survival of theatres. We have audiences who've changed their whole way of thinking about movies because of Covid and streaming, and technology in general, phones etc. People are abandoning celluloid. We have filmmakers who, for some reason, are okay with their films going directly to streaming, or are just abandoning film altogether, and saying, "Hey, I'll take a series." It's very frustrating for me, for somebody who's finally broken in after all these years of trying, to see the art form that I love starting to drift away.

What was the last new film to blow you away?
I think that Catherine Breillat's *Last Summer* is the strongest film so far this year. It spoke to me.

The rise of streaming — blessing or curse?
I love the accessibility to

almost any title you could ever want. But when it starts affecting other forms of exhibition, and also the way that filmmakers make money, well, that's a problem.

What can cinemas do to make moviegoing more enticing?
I don't think it's in any way the theatres' fault, or even their responsibility, but I think audiences have to be reminded that it is a wonderful way of seeing a feature film. I would love to see theatres getting film projectors back in. I think that that really does bring audiences out.

What's your take on AI?
Anytime that AI is bringing people back from the dead, and suddenly we have a new Marilyn Monroe film, obviously, there are major issues there. I don't want it

to rob any below-the-line crew members of their jobs, eliminating a workforce. It can help in pre-vizing, and with some production design.

Name one or more people whom you consider to be 'the future of cinema'.
I really love the fact that there is a new wave of auto-fiction coming out of New York City. I executive-produced Joanna Arnow's film *The Feeling That The Time For Doing Something Has Passed*, and I love her, I see her working in feature films forever. The new wave of auto-fiction, where people are playing versions of themselves, really blurs the line: it's *vérité*, but very personal and intimate. And it's not just New York — there's the movie *Vera* that came out of Austria last year. I see that as a next step in filmmaking. ●



NEW WHO



HOW BARRY JENKINS JOURNEYED DEEP INSIDE THE DISNEY DREAM FACTORY TO MAKE **MUFASA:**

PRIZONS



THE LION KING — SURVIVING TECHNOLOGY, TROLLS AND TRAGEDY ALONG THE WAY...

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

It was 4 July 2020. The red-letter day (a Saturday) when word first reached Barry Jenkins that the powers-that-be at Disney wanted him to direct a prequel to *The Lion King*. Having spent the past 112 days working on the epic (and excellent) Apple TV+ show *The Underground Railroad*, Jenkins had been ready for a break, so had decided to head out with partner and fellow filmmaker

Lulu Wang on a last-minute road trip. As they cruised up the coast of California, the sea twinkling in the perma-sunshine, his phone pinged to inform him he had been sent the screenplay for Mufasa's origin story. His immediate response? "Extreme scepticism."

It was an understandable reaction. Since his feature debut, *Medicine For Melancholy*, in 2008 — a movie made for the princely sum of \$15,000 — Jenkins has carved out a reputation for tender, nuanced filmmaking, exploring themes of identity, sexuality and societal issues. The acclaimed results have included coming-of-age classic *Moonlight*, which memorably won the Best Picture Oscar, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a romantic drama based on the 1974 James Baldwin novel. And now, he was getting sent a script for a photoreal-animated \$200 million blockbuster musical about talking animals. Did Mickey Mouse have the right email address?

"A guy like me doesn't make those films," Jenkins admits. "I just thought, 'You know what? I've been doing the same thing for eight straight years. Maybe it'll be cool to do something different.'"

Jenkins might not be a guy who makes "those films" but he is a guy who loves the original 1994 animated movie. The *Hamlet*-esque tale of Mufasa, Scar, and Simba left an imprint on him as a teenager while he was babysitting his two younger nephews. "I was done with cartoons at that point," he recalls. "But every time I put it on, it held their attention. And the more I watched it, the more it held my attention. It opened them up to all these really interesting and deep conversations about life and family, death, regeneration, and legacy." In a conservative estimate, he reckons he has seen *The Lion King* about 150 times on a worn-out VHS tape.

Spawning multiple sequels, a Broadway musical, and even *Black Is King* — a contemporary reimagining by Beyoncé — *The Lion King*'s status as a venerated classic has only grown over time. "It's like Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, Barack Obama, maybe *Star Wars*, and *The Lion King*," says Jenkins, listing comparable modern-day phenoms. "It has that level of cultural penetration." Along with the original animated movie, he cites the Broadway musical



Clockwise from

main: Sarabi (voiced by Tiffany Boone), Taka (Kelvin Harrison Jr), Mufasa (Aaron Pierre) and a youthful Rafiki (Kagiso Lediga); Rafiki offers Mufasa counsel; High on the hog: Timon (Billy Eichner) hitches a lift with Pumbaa (Seth Rogen); Baby Taka (Theo Somolu) and Mufasa (Braelyn Rankins).



THE MANE MAN

FRESH FROM KICKING BUTT IN *REBEL RIDGE*, AARON PIERRE IS ABOUT TO ROAR AS THE TITLE CHARACTER IN *MUFASA*. HE REFLECTS ON HIS HUGE YEAR SO FAR



as his favourite. “There’s something very special about that version of this story. It was a North Star for me.”

What *Mufasa: The Lion King* dares to do is ask questions never posed before (not even in 2004 direct-to-DVD semi-prequel *The Lion King 3: Hakuna Matata*). How did Mufasa and Scar come to be the characters we first met three decades ago? And who or what shaped them? Once Jenkins read the script (after some gentle cajoling from Wang), his fascination with the potential answers helped him see how he might add to the franchise’s prolific legacy. “I found something really rich and rewarding in a place where I thought I knew everything, and I realised the audience would probably have the same experience.”

What *Mufasa* represents, then, is a journey into the unknown. Not just with a director trying new things with his filmmaking, but also in the telling of a fresh story in a familiar sandbox. And as it turned out, Jenkins and Mufasa were a match made in Pride Rock.

WHEN JENKINS SIGNED ON FOR *MUFASA*, he made sure to do his due diligence. “I went back and watched the 1994 film, the 2019 film [directed by Jon Favreau], and then I went and saw the Broadway show,” he tells *Empire*. “Part of that was just to have this Venn diagram of where those three things overlapped, and what each of those creators did to make it their own.”

Jenkins is keen to cite writer Jeff Nathanson’s script as a big reason as to why he came on board. “I was shocked at just how many things [were answered] that I had assumed were probably unknowable about Scar and Mufasa,” he says. “And yet Jeff had found some really

What’s your history with *The Lion King*?

The original *Lion King* came out the year I was born [1994], so that’s something I personally hold very near and dear to my heart. I imagine the first time I saw it was probably in ’96 or ’97. This was one of, if not the only, Disney animations that were set on the continent of Africa, with that environment and that scenery. My mother’s Jamaican. My father is from Curaçao, which is in the Caribbean, and Sierra Leone, which is West Africa. And I think for me — subconsciously then and consciously now — it just made me feel seen.

What impact did James Earl Jones’ Mufasa have on you?

[His] portrayal of Mufasa is legendary. He’s a hero of many and he’s one of my greatest inspirations. I’ve studied him. I continue to study him. It’s deeply, deeply sad that he is no longer with us.

How challenging was it to dislodge yourself from his performance in voicing Mufasa?

It is so nerve-racking to be contributing to the legacy of a character that James Earl Jones birthed. I got to explore the point in time from his adolescence to [becoming] king. What was he like when he was experiencing feelings of being ostracised, being an outsider, being lost? I’m hoping that, in a small way, this allows Mufasa to

feel even more tangible, because we get to see the journey to that point.

You were brought on to Jeremy Saulnier’s thriller *Rebel Ridge* quite late in the day, replacing John Boyega. What was that experience like for you?

My team gave me a call, and the energy of that call was filled with energy, excitement, and a lot of passion. The moment I hear Jeremy Saulnier has written something, I’m already on board. I love *Blue Ruin*. I had a Zoom with Jeremy. I can’t remember exactly how long it lasted, but almost immediately we identified that we were on the same page so far as how we wanted to bring this story to life. Then the time came when I was out in Louisiana, New Orleans, and we got to work, and it was just a beautiful experience. There was not one day that my alarm went off that I didn’t leap out of bed.

How have the last few weeks been, since the film dropped onto Netflix to great acclaim?

Honestly, although I’m an actor, I’m actually an introvert, so I haven’t really been outside. I’ve been enjoying the moment in the privacy of my little apartment here in LA, minding my business, and being grateful for the reception.

You were briefly attached to Marvel’s *Blade*. Can you say who you were going to play?

Unfortunately I’m not able to disclose who I was going to portray. If I could, I would! The nature of this job is that changes happen. And that’s okay. But I’m still gonna be watching *Blade* when it comes out. I know that much.

What’s next?

At the moment I’m working on Season 4 of *The Morning Show*. I’m working with phenomenal artists — Jennifer Aniston, Marion Cotillard, Greta Lee, and Billy Crudup, just to name a few. I always have the approach of being a student and being a sponge. I never want to feel stagnant. So I’m just learning, I’m growing, I’m evolving.



Director Barry Jenkins and Mufasa himself, Aaron Pierre, chat adolescent-lion motivation in the recording studio.

lovely and thoughtful ways to go into the canon, and really mix up these relationships. I remember Lulu and I got home pretty late one night. I was like, 'I'll just read five pages.' But 45 pages in, I turned to Lulu and said, 'Holy shit!'"

Told in flashbacks, *Mufasa* spins a tale of how the titular lion (voiced by Aaron Pierre) went from being a lost, orphaned cub to animal royalty. Along the way, he'll form a bond with a sympathetic Taka (who will become Scar, played by Kelvin Harrison Jr), heir to a royal bloodline. "These are the experiences, the people, the family, this is the community that makes Mufasa become so great," says Jenkins. "And so all these satellite characters are a sounding board, a proving ground. They test him in these really wonderful ways."

It seems incredible that Jenkins could go from *The Underground Railroad* — a powerful story of people attempting an escape from slavery in the southern United States in the 1800s — to *Mufasa*. In fact, he was working on both projects at the same time for over a year, as he finished off post-production on his TV drama. It's a tonal whiplash to rival Spielberg's 1993 one-two punch of *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler's List*.

"Being so deep on *The Underground Railroad*, which was a very heavy show, especially at the end when you're just watching it over and over again, it was crazy to then step over to the right to see this very bright, sing-song-y thing that I'm also working on," Jenkins says. "I realised, 'Oh, this is gonna be the perfect thing to step into next.'"

Though on the surface it may seem like *Mufasa* is worlds away from Jenkins' other work, the themes at play in this prequel mirror what Jenkins has explored elsewhere. "There's just so much in this film about the way people from disparate situations, disparate backgrounds, come together and find this commonality of purpose, and then find this commonality of yearning... two things that have been very core and central to my work. You can be cynical and say, 'Why [make] a tentpole film?' But you could also be very hopeful and go, 'Because it's in this place, so many people are going to engage with it.'"

But as he took his first steps into a CGI world, Jenkins, the poet of hand-crafted, distinctly analogue visions, had a mountain to climb. And one more daunting, perhaps, than Pride Rock itself.

IF YOU THINK BARRY JENKINS HAS NO experience with digital effects, you'd be wrong. In *Moonlight*, VFX house Significant Others corrected mistakes — massaging focus on a Steadicam shot, erasing a mic pack left in shot — and added grace notes, like comping in an ocean when it was too dark to see. For *Beale Street*, CGI turned modern-day New York into its grittier '70s incarnation, digitally adding graffiti on the subway cars. On *The Underground Railroad*, the horrors of the slavery era were enhanced by computers, making characters

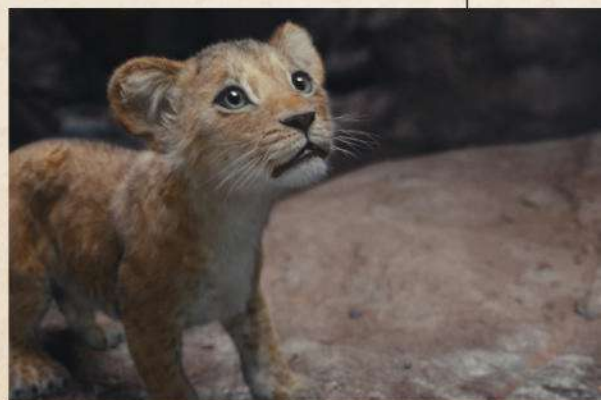


emaciated or even removing limbs. But nothing could prepare Jenkins for the full-on digital tool kit of *Mufasa*. "It excited me," he levels, "but it also terrified me."

Rather than be led by technology, the filmmaker deployed the technology to his own end. Working with his regular cinematographer James Laxton and, later, editor Joi McMillon, Jenkins cleaved close to his usual aesthetic of concentrating on the human face. Just imagine a supercut of the stunning close-ups in his work; Mahershala Ali and Trevante Rhodes (*Moonlight*), Kiki Layne (*Beale Street*) and Thuso Mbedu (*Railroad*). But, of course, with *Mufasa*, there is one key difference. There is not a human face to be seen.

"We aren't accustomed to seeing some of these animals up close," Jenkins muses of his leonine cast. "We see human beings every day. We know what the lifting of the brows means.

Clockwise from top: Formidable Kiros (Mads Mikkelsen); Simples! Mandrill and meerkat compare the bark(et); Paws for thought: Simba's cub Kiara (Blue Ivy Carter); A pensive Sarabi steps away from her tribe.





We know what the clenching of the teeth means. We don't with these animals, and yet we think we do, because we watch the 1994 animated film."

Jenkins and his usual collaborators found allies in VFX house MPC, who had worked with Jon Favreau on his 2019 *Lion King*. "They felt like they had learned a lot of things from making that film," says Jenkins. "Knowing our aesthetic and what we wanted to do with both the facial expressions and the camera movement, they were game. They had mastered the tools to the point that they could bend them to our will."

The performances of the animals are designed to elicit our emotions. As is, of course, the music. The '94 *Lion King*'s list of bangers — 'Be Prepared', 'I Just Can't Wait To Be King', 'Can You Feel The Love Tonight' and (Jenkins' favourite) 'Hakuna Matata' — are all mainstays on any respectable 'Best Disney Songs' playlist. For the new film, Jenkins enlisted composer Dave Metzger and award-winning songwriter Lin-Manuel Miranda, but they're joined by a familiar voice: Lebo M, who provided the Zulu vocals that open the original *Lion King*. "Lebo is the first voice you hear in this film as well, singing a new song," Jenkins says. "We're living in the tone and the atmosphere of all the work that came before, but also trying to push out to some new horizons as well."

Jenkins was adamant that his voice cast needed to step up to the mic — Milli Vanilli-ing it was not an option. "I'm really proud that in this movie everybody sings their songs," he beams. "There are no ringers brought in to sing these musical pieces. So if people think Aaron's very talented now, just wait until you hear him singing."

Pierre has some big pipes to fill. James Earl Jones' vocal performance as Mufasa in the original movie is memorably commanding. When *Empire* speaks with Jenkins, it's one day

after Jones' passing. "We all admire him, and we all look up to and hope to live up to his level of craft." Although, Jenkins is keen to emphasise that the version of Mufasa we see in his film has not yet ascended to royalty, and thus will sound a lot different from the lion we're used to hearing: "This kid is not that grown man yet."

But once audiences reach the end of his movie, Jenkins' hope is that his film will help to enrich the original. "Ernest Hemingway's iceberg theory talks about the 20 per cent above the surface, and 80 per cent below. This film gets to go into that 80 per cent below and lifts a lot more of it to the surface. All those things that you feel but don't know why you feel them, this film illustrates why you felt those things."

Emotions, of course, run deep through anything *Lion King*-related. And the filmmaker found himself on the more toxic end of that from the moment he signed on the dotted line.

"SOULLESS." "A PAYCHECK MOVIE."

"You're too talented for this." Social media is littered with messages from people expressing their disapproval of Jenkins directing a *Lion King* movie. Some of them were even brazen enough to '@' the director online, prompting Jenkins to defend his decision. But he knows he's got nothing left to prove.

"I used to be very active on socials, and part of that was engaging with people," he says. "But there's just so much damn work to do and so much internal pressure, that the idea of external pressure having any effect on the work you do is just meaningless. This choice was made in a vacuum to do the film. And I'm glad I came down on the side of 'do the film'."

It's not hard to see parallels between Jenkins and the character his new movie is named after. Like the King of Pride Rock, he has

earned greatness from humble beginnings. And as his career has progressed, he too has found a tribe. "When I took the project, I was explaining to a friend how odd even I would probably find it that I was making this film. But this person said to me, 'Barry, your life is really interesting, because look at all these people that you work with. They're not just your associates. They're your family.'" In that way, Jenkins could easily see himself in the project, regardless of its size. "A community not bound necessarily by blood, but by purpose, by intent, by spiritual connection, which is how I feel about my own life. So that was a way that I kind of started to see myself in the project."

For many, *The Lion King* was their first experience with processing the death of a parent. And while working on *Mufasa*, Jenkins found himself having to experience it firsthand when his mother passed away. "It was kind of a shock," he says. "I thought it would destabilise me much more than it did. But being in this story world at that point for two-and-a-half years and dealing with the themes of this project, I just had an understanding of what I was going through. I feel like I was maybe three steps ahead in the grieving process because of the work that's in the story."

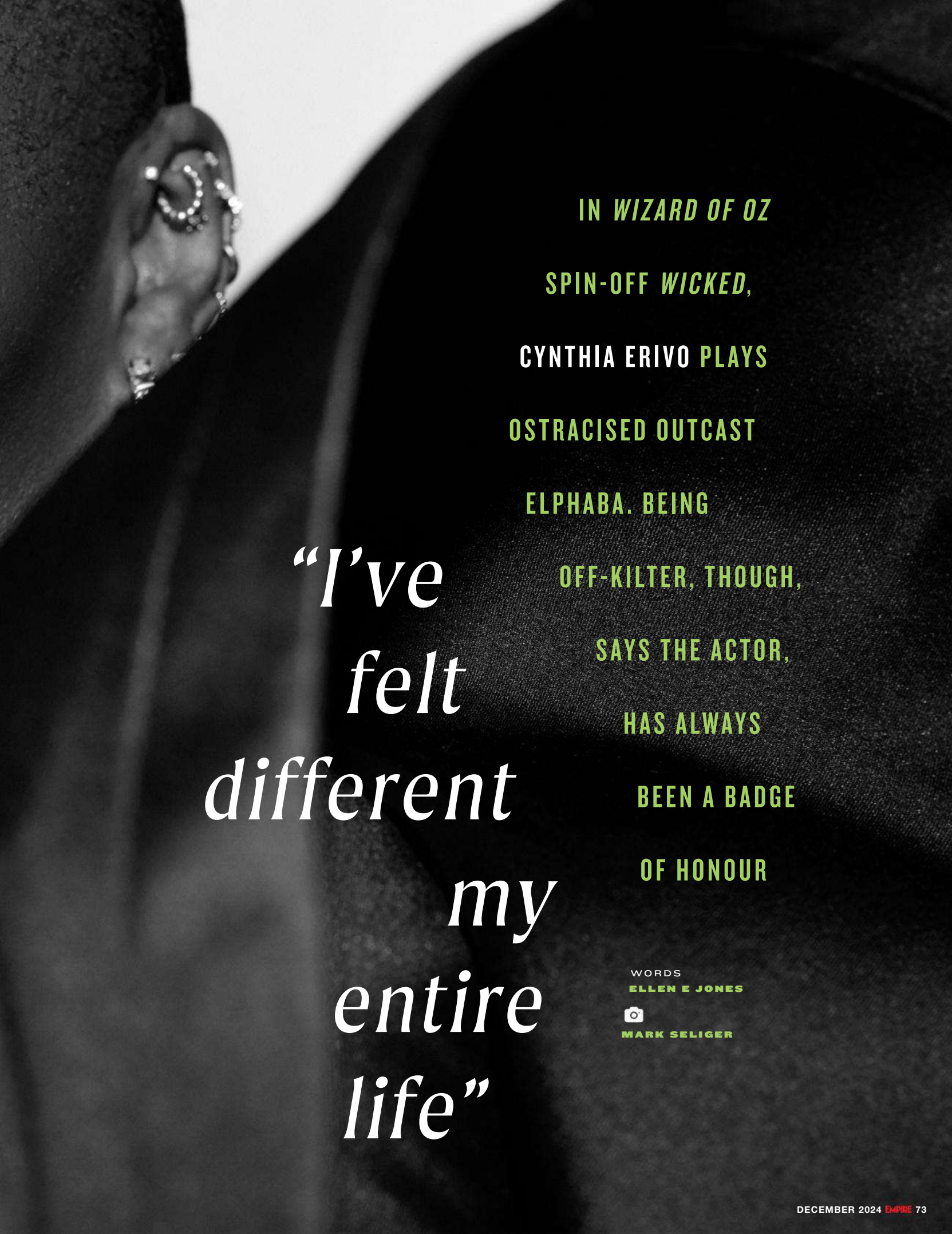
Working on *Mufasa* helped guide Jenkins through a profoundly difficult moment. But beyond that, it reaffirmed that he was exactly where he was supposed to be. "There was something about it that I thought, 'Okay, I'm definitely doing the right thing with my life right now,'" he concludes.

Three decades after he and his nephews were first introduced to Pride Rock, Jenkins will open up a whole new set of conversations with his own *Lion King* movie. Did someone say something about the circle of life? 🐾

MUFASA: THE LION KING IS IN CINEMAS FROM 20 DECEMBER

Cynthia Erivo,
photographed
exclusively for
Empire in
New York on
4 September 2024.





*“I’ve
felt
different
my
entire
life”*

IN *WIZARD OF OZ*
SPIN-OFF *WICKED*,
CYNTHIA ERIVO PLAYS
OSTRACISED OUTCAST
ELPHABA. BEING
OFF-KILTER, THOUGH,
SAYS THE ACTOR,
HAS ALWAYS
BEEN A BADGE
OF HONOUR

WORDS

ELLEN E JONES



MARK SELIGER

There was no yellow brick road laid out for CYNTHIA ERIVO to follow.

Instead, the British-Nigerian has found her own way, from a show-stealing solo in her south London primary's nativity play ('Silent Night'; not a dry eye in the house), to a multi-hyphenate, multi-award-winning career, spanning stage, screen and latterly, the recording studio. This month, 37-year-old Erivo stars as Elphaba, aka the Wicked Witch of the West, alongside Ariana Grande, Jeff Goldblum and Michelle Yeoh, in the big-screen adaptation of *Wicked*, the *Wizard Of Oz* spin-off and hit Broadway musical. It's a role she feels she's "innately understood" even before being offered it, from experiencing the musical, and there have been plenty more sing-along adventures en route to this dream-come-true.

Throughout, she's forged her own path. In the few short years since Erivo moved stateside in 2015 (at Oprah's personal invitation) to play

Celie in the Broadway revival of *The Color Purple*, she's shaved off all her hair, for good; starred in her debut movie, *Widows* — for Steve McQueen, and alongside Viola Davis, no less; shared a tearful, hand-holding moment with unlikely new bestie Jeff Bridges (more of which later) while prepping for her *tour de force* turn in *Bad Times At The El Royale*; learned to sing like Aretha Franklin for a TV biopic; impressed as Harriet Tubman in the abolitionist action-hero's big-screen outing *Harriet*, then performed the song from the movie — which she also co-wrote — live at the 2020 Oscars. Phew.

She's also done all of this while being unapologetically, uniquely herself. Maybe Cynthia Erivo is the kind of indefatigable, ever-evolving talent that Hollywood struggles to keep up with — but that's okay. Because she knows exactly where she's going. With or without a yellow brick road.

How did *Wicked* come into your life?

The first time I heard of *Wicked* was back in drama school. A friend of mine who played the piano said, "There's this musical that I think you'd really, really like. We should take the book to a room and sing it when we can." I'd never seen the show, I just fell in love with this music. So whenever we had time to be on our own, in a room with a piano, that's the music we were singing. By the time I left drama school, I knew it like the back of my hand. Then, on my 25th birthday, I decided to take myself on a date to see the show in the West End. I remember having the most incredible experience, watching the story about this person who feels different

— is different — and is ostracised because they are different. But at the same time, they're also really, really powerful, and the thing that unlocks that [power] is an acceptance of who they are.

So you saw some of yourself in that?

I've felt different my whole entire life. I think I just am. I think I'm an oddball. And that's okay. I think the way I look at style and beauty is different and just... I think every Black woman walking around in this world feels a little bit outside of the norm, because we don't necessarily fit what is meant to be the norm. So, as someone who is Black, British, African, an actor, gay, the whole lot... That's just what I am, and I think I've leaned into my difference; into my 'rebel', I guess.

And now in *Wicked* you're... green. What was it like being green? Was Kermit The Frog right about that one?

It was really comfy! I think, depending on what we were doing for the day, it could take anything from two-and-a-half hours to four-and-a-half hours [in the make-up chair]. It felt like a second skin. I was never irritated by it. I think a lot of research went into what shade would be right, what would sit on my skin in the right way and how I could take care of my skin whilst it was in the make-up. There was the option to do CGI. I was asked if I wanted to do that, or to do practical, and I knew I wanted to do practical before I even started, because I wanted to be able to look at my hands and see green hands. I wanted to look in the mirror and see a green



Erivo goes green to play Elphaba, alongside Ariana Grande's Glinda, in the upcoming *Wicked*.





most FREEING "Shaving my HAIR off was one of the
things I could have ever
done for myself."

face. I also wanted to see the reactions of other people seeing me as a green person, as opposed to me walking in as myself, because it informed how I performed.

What's Ariana Grande like?

Delightful. We were texting last night. When people ask, "What's she like?", I feel like I have to explain that we've been together in this, doing this, at this point for, like, two-and-a-half years. So she's like my sister. It's not this new person that I just met, like, "She's amazing! I love working with her! Blah blah blah..." And we love singing together, because our voices work together, which is really cool, because it's hard to find that.

It seems like big-screen musicals are back in fashion at the moment, what with *The Color Purple*, *Wonka*, *Joker: Folie À Deux* and this. You must be enjoying that.

There's something really special about a movie musical. In its essence, it becomes a spectacle, whether you like it or not. I think that we don't give audiences enough credit when it comes to musicals, so we pretend that musicals aren't musicals. And I think now, it's okay to just be like, "Hey, this is a musical, come and see it, you'll survive... and you might even like it!" I never understand when [musical haters] are like, "Why are people singing randomly?" Because people sing every day, randomly, in the middle of the street! They literally do! I have sat in cars and people are just singing along to songs! Or the amount of times where people do that passive-aggressive thing of, when something happens that they don't like, instead of saying, "What's going on?", they *sing* the thing that's happening. Or at football stadiums, all of a sudden, everyone is singing along together — that's singing in real life!

Do you have any heroes that you model yourself on?

Yeah. Barbra Streisand and Cicely Tyson. I read

Cicely Tyson's autobiography, and I understood and really agreed with how she chose to navigate her career: how different it was, the choices she made in the characters and as a person; her love for fashion, and the way she used hair as a political statement. I think at one point, she decided to shave it all off too. And honestly, having shaved my hair off, it's one of the most freeing things I could have ever done for myself. I made the decision when I left drama school to cut it. I guess I saw everyone around me committing to long hair and I just didn't want it. I wanted to be different. And also — I don't know why I had this insight when I was 23 — but I wanted people to see my face. I didn't want hair to be an obstacle. So I cut it, just so it was out of my face, and as time went on, it got shorter and shorter and shorter. After *Harriet*, I was like, "Actually, you know what? I think I'm good." And I just shaved it off. So I've been like this (*entirely shaven*) for the last two, three years. I like it.



Top to bottom:

In Steve McQueen's *Widows* (2018), with Viola Davis; *Breaking out* in *Bad Times At The El Royale* (2018); As Harriet Tubman in 2019's *Harriet*. She secured two Oscar nominations for the film — Best Actress and Best Original Song.

Was Whoopi Goldberg also a role model for you?

Yes. (*Laughs*) I think I have been following in her footsteps! (*Erivo has played the Goldberg-originated roles in two stage musicals, The Color Purple and Sister Act.*) I've met her a few times and she's just really freaking cool, man! You know sometimes you're told that you should never meet your idols? She's an exception to the rule. Every time I have met her, I've always been taken aback by how lovely she is. And real. She's a truth-teller. She doesn't put lots of flowers on it, but it's never meant to hurt you. I think she's a really wonderful human being and I think what she's been able to do in the industry is unlike anybody else. She's managed to be the truest form of renaissance woman that exists.

The very first film you ever made was Steve McQueen's 2018 crime thriller *Widows*. That must have been a baptism of fire...

Completely! Like, I'm standing in front of Michelle Rodriguez, Viola Davis, Steve McQueen, Colin Farrell, Daniel Kaluuya... and I'd never done any film before! So I was like, "I'm going to be the student." I desperately didn't want to let the side down. You don't want to be on a team where Viola Davis is the captain and you're the weakling. You just don't want to be there. So I really was listening all the time. And I don't think those baptisms of fire ever stopped, because I finished *The Color Purple*, 2017, January 8 — my 30th birthday — and then I went into [shooting] *Widows* pretty soon after that. Then after *Widows*, we filmed *Bad Times At The El Royale*, where my scene partner is Jeff Bridges (*laughs*) and you have Jon Hamm and Dakota [Johnson] and it's... *a lot*. And then I think we filmed *Harriet* at the end of 2018 and then I started working on [*Genius:*] *Aretha*.

So within an 18-month period you're meeting and working with a lot of big-deal movie stars and legends. Did you ever feel starstruck?

Are you joking? I'm sitting in front of Jeff Bridges and... yes! [But] you have to suppress it a little bit. I guess it's making sure you see a person as human, and Jeff and I had a really beautiful, human moment early on. His character was supposed to have Alzheimer's and because the two of us spent so much time together in this movie, my character cottoned on to it quite quickly. So when we were all in this room doing a script-reading, at one point he said, "Cyn..." — he calls me 'C' or 'Cyn'. He said, "C, I've found this video of this woman who had an episode, and she has Alzheimer's, and I felt like this would be something that could help us both?" So we sit and we watch this video, and without looking at each other, he grabs my hand, I grab his, and the both of us are just in tears. And that was one of those moments, where it's not now, "Oh my God, it's Jeff Bridges!"; it's, "Oh, it's Jeff, and we've got something to do together, that's the work."





You sang live a lot on the set of *Bad Times At The El Royale*. What was that like?

Yeah, every piece of music I did on that set I did live. There's a particular scene where the song is 'You Can't Hurry Love', which we did about 27 times in a row, because it was shot in a one (a single, continuous take), so it's like a pretty dance that you have to figure out how to do. But you prep for it, and I'm also really determined. So I was like, "No, we're gonna do this, and I will do it. It's fine." I wanted to make sure that we actually got it done, and got it done in the best possible way, and the best possible way was to do it live, to keep going. And, I think because I come from that practice of live singing [in stage musicals], singing this song that many times didn't scare me. Not that it wasn't a challenge, but it didn't scare me.

You often play these phenomenally talented-bordering-on-supernatural women — like Harriet Tubman or Aretha Franklin and now Elphaba in *Wicked* — in situations where they need to assert their humanity. You're an extraordinary woman, so I wondered if you'd ever felt like your humanity was being overlooked?

That's a really beautiful question! I think sometimes, yes. I think sometimes people see what I can do first, before they see the person. And so sometimes, even in small situations... like, I went to see a show, this piece by a really talented person, Larry Owens. It's in a small, intimate place. I was sitting and watching, and when I'm watching I don't tend to have my phone out. I'm the person who never really takes pictures of the things that are happening, because I'm in it, I'm experiencing it. So I'm watching the show, and I catch sight of a phone in my periphery and notice the person next to me is taking a picture of herself and me, like angling herself so she gets me. And I had to go, "Can we... Can we not do that? I want to watch this, and I think you should be watching this too." It's those moments we have to remind people, I'm a person as well, y'know?

You're known for playing Americans. Any plans to come back home and work in British cinema or TV, playing a British role?

People still sometimes assume I'm American, but I don't know why, because I spend so much time talking and whenever I'm talking, I sound

like this! (well-spoken British accent) I mean, I would love to play more English roles, but you have to be cast in them.

You don't get offered any British roles?

Rarely. We do have one film, *Prima Facie* (a screen adaptation of the hit play which starred Jodie Comer, about an ambitious London defence barrister), that we are going to be doing and that came to me, which is really special — that's an English character. But it doesn't come very often. I couldn't tell you why. I don't know.

***The Color Purple* was a massive turning-point for you. Was any part of you disappointed about not being in the film?**

Ooooh. That is a long conversation. That is... erm... complicated. But I'm very glad it was Fantasia [Barrino], because I think she deserved the chance to do this again, because she did it first on Broadway and I think... she didn't get to finish the way she deserved to. (Barrino left the run early due to illness.) So I was really glad to see that she had the chance to do this again, in this way. I think she deserved that chance. And also I think it was a really brave thing for her to say yes to doing it again. And so, I have no right to be [proud], but I'm very proud of her for taking that chance, for doing that and for taking it on. I think she was the only person that was meant to do it.

Top: Giving it some welly as the Queen of Soul in *Genius: Aretha*.
Right: In HBO Stephen King mini-series *The Outsider* (2020).



How do you choose TV and movie roles? Do you feel slightly unfulfilled if a role doesn't involve singing?

No, I enjoy those roles just as much, because the thing is, I can sing whenever I want to and, nine times out of ten, I'll be doing a project and there'll be a concert that I have to go and do at the same time. I think when I get the chance to just be a character that doesn't sing, there's something really refreshing about that. I never felt like I was missing anything when it came to Holly [in HBO supernatural thriller *The Outsider*]. Even though she's sort of to herself, very subtle, small, kooky, in another way she was so big. There was so much to do with her: her speech, her pattern, the way she sees the world, the way she moved. So I guess I pick the roles that scare me shitless! Anything that scares me, anything where I'm like, "Is this going to be a challenge? Does it freak me the heck out?" If the answer to those questions is a yes, then I'm probably going to say, "I would like to do this."

You've already got a Tony, an Emmy and a Grammy (for *The Color Purple* on Broadway), and you were Oscar-nominated for *Harriet*.

A lot of people would call that successful, but what's your personal definition of success?

I think the freedom to do the things that you want to do is a measure of success. It's a sense of contentment, but also feeling like there's more and that more is possible. I think that's what success is. Because, y'know, nice, pretty things are always nice and pretty — that's great. But the idea that I can wake up tomorrow and, if I want to, run down to a studio and figure out a song, then I can. Or, if I want to talk to a director about an idea for a film that I have, then I can. The doors are opening for me to be able to be a fully creative human being that doesn't just do other people's projects, but creates my own. That feels like real success to me. 🍷

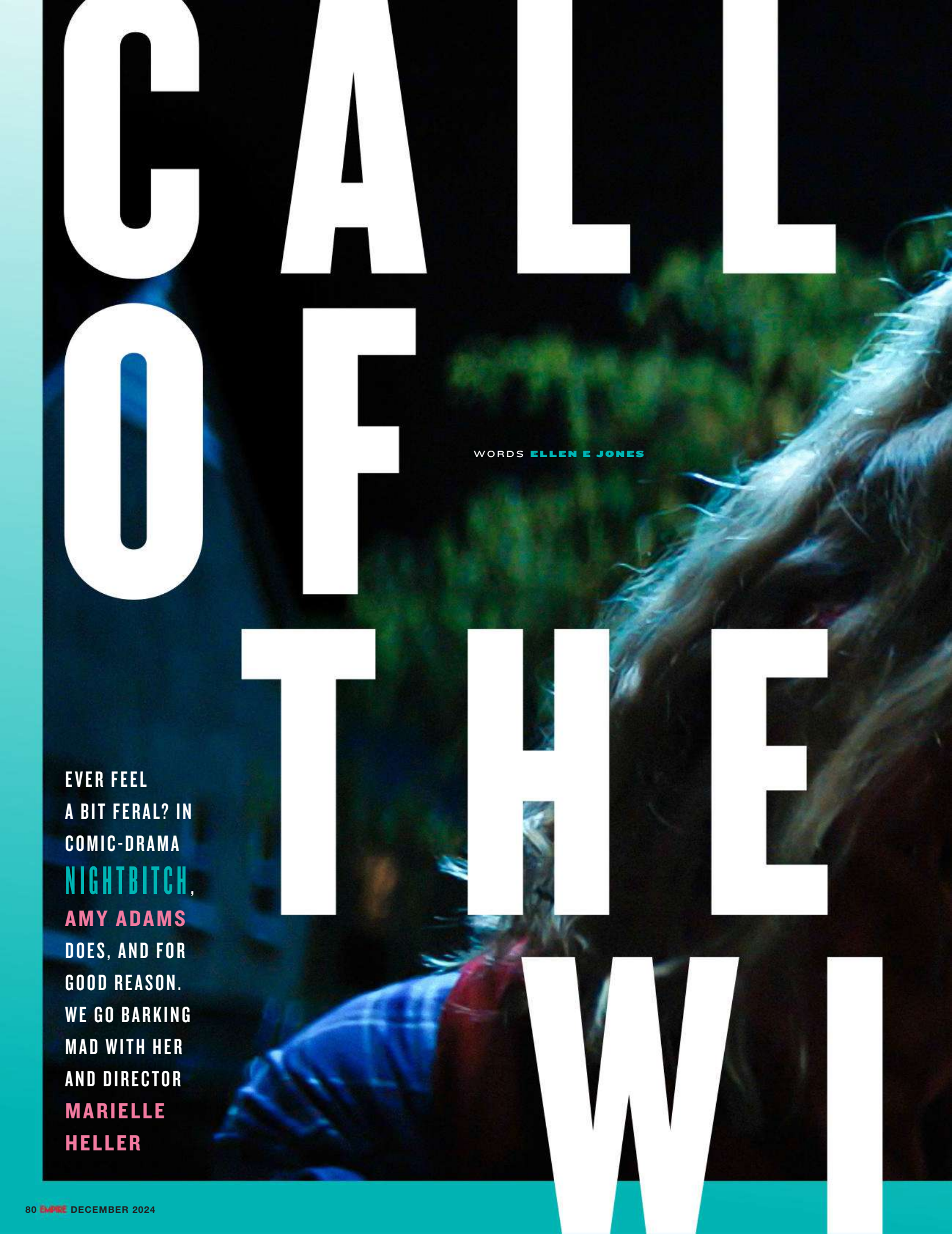
WICKED IS IN CINEMAS FROM 22 NOVEMBER



SHITLESS! Anything where I'm like, 'Does it FREAK me the heck out?'"

"I pick the roles that SCARE me

Styling: Daniel Edley.
Styling assistants: Joao Pedro Assis
and Bronwen Lam.
Make-up: Joanna Simkin at
The Wall Group using Clinique.
Producer: Madi Overstreet.
Photo assistant: Reggie Desilus.
Digi tech: Adam Dowling.



CALL OF THE W

WORDS ELLEN E JONES

EVER FEEL
A BIT FERAL? IN
COMIC-DRAMA
NIGHTBITCH,
AMY ADAMS
DOES, AND FOR
GOOD REASON.
WE GO BARKING
MAD WITH HER
AND DIRECTOR
**MARIELLE
HELLER**



THAT ELUSIVE BDE — “BIG DOG ENERGY” — is a quality almost as difficult to define as it is to achieve. So when it came to *Nightbitch*, in which Amy Adams stars as a frustrated stay-at-home mom (simply referred to as ‘Mother’) by day and a stray, street-roaming dog by night, the filmmakers could only be sure of what they *didn’t* want.

“Do you remember me barking for you, Mari?” Addressing *Nightbitch*’s writer-director Marielle Heller on our three-way Zoom, Adams is smiling — half-sheepish, half-proud — as she recalls those early days of prepping for the role. She’s seated in front of a large window at her home, red hair falling loose on her shoulders and wearing a soft grey, cowl-neck sweater, which happens to match the small, grey dog asleep on her lap. “We were *very* serious, and I was not at all self-conscious until I’m talking about it now... but we really did! Like, I barked for you *a lot*. I was like, ‘Would you like it down here? Or up here?’” she says of searching for the perfect pitch. “And I practised the growl in the mirror, just to make sure you could see the teeth you wanted to see.”

“Are you kidding, me?!” responds Heller. “We had such detailed conversations, where we were like, ‘Okay, that sounds like a small dog,’ but we needed *Big Dog Energy*.” Adams agrees, with an adoring glance down at her sleeping pet. “No, it couldn’t be like my little lovebugs.”

There was a time when the news that Amy Adams was starring in a movie with the gloriously grindhouse-sounding title of ‘*Nightbitch*’ might have caused consternation. But that was back when she was the ingénue of *Junebug* (2005) and *Enchanted* (2007), before she shimmied in *American Hustle* (2013), and demonstrated heavyweight chops in 2016’s *Nocturnal Animals* and *Arrival*. Now everybody knows that Adams’ naturally sweet disposition — the product, perhaps, of her Mormon upbringing in Colorado — sits alongside the verve and versatility of an all-time acting great.

So it comes as no surprise to learn that for this new movie, Adams dug deep — like a Basset Hound looking for a bone — and delivered. They had initially hired a body double “to do some of the more intense running and digging stuff”, but Adams, who trained as a dancer before making it big, proved so adept at the physical aspects of the role that the body double was never required. “You really had to leave behind your inhibitions,” enthuses Heller. “It was so primal, and you went there so amazingly. Like it was... *wild*.”

“That’s BDE,” says Adams with a modest shrug.



NIGHTBITCH STARTED LIFE AS A MAGICAL-realist novel by American writer Rachel Yoder, which Adams’ production company, Bond Group Entertainment, picked up pre-publication, then sent to Heller with a note to the effect of, “We have no idea *how* it could be a movie, but we feel like you might be able to figure it out?” Heller, says Adams, was the first and only choice to direct. “I saw Mari in it, and then knowing that she had just had a baby, I thought that she might have a very personal and unique perspective.” This makes sense. As the director of unforgettably frank coming-of-ager *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl*, the gently provocative *A Beautiful* ➤

LD

Day In The Neighbourhood and the Academy Award-nominated *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, Heller is known for her stories of spiky characters in moments of transition. Though none of those transitions have been quite as literal — or metaphorical — as in the Stepford (were)wives feminist fable at the heart of *Nightbitch*.

“I do think there’s something about going through birth which makes you believe in magic,” muses Heller. “It’s so mind-blowing. Also, being so sleep-deprived puts you in this headspace where you leave the world of rational thinking and start to see things in a looser way.” She has endeavoured to translate some of that postpartum haze to the screen. “I loved that when I read the book, there was an ambiguity to what was real and what wasn’t, and I very consciously decided early on that I’d also leave things open to interpretation.”

As for genre categorisation, this too changes by moonlight. Heller likes to joke about her movie being “a comedy for women and a horror movie for men”, based on the reactions of the men in her life when she first showed them the script. “A lot of them made the same comment to me, which was like, ‘Oh, no! This made me so uncomfortable! I mean, I know that’s *why* it’s good, but I don’t want us to talk about these things!’” Whereas most of the women she spoke to just found it funny. “And I’m surrounded by good, wonderful men, who are also mostly parents and great parents — and a lot are primary parents, like my brother. But I think, even in the most equal relationships, gender roles can creep in.”

Adams’ husband Darren, for one, loved it. “He finds it illuminating, funny. He’s also had time where he was — I like how Mari calls it ‘the primary parent’ — so he identified, in a way. And he never felt alienated by it being a quote-unquote ‘mother’s tale’. He saw it more as a family story, from a mother’s perspective.” Which is not to say there weren’t still some awkward moments of recognition in the Adams household. Namely the scene in which a passive-aggressive exchange about whose responsibility it is to shop for milk escalates into an aggressive-aggressive row. “I mean, he’s not gonna love [me sharing] this, but that part is just really relatable.”

Both women were able to take further inspiration from their own lives, to layer on top of Yoder’s original story — which is just as well because, as they note, there aren’t a ton of cinematic precedents for this kind of story. “I think my influences have been from mothers themselves — women in our industry, my sisters, my own mother,” says Adams. “Those are the things I take with me as I go into roles, not things I see in other films.”

Heller’s influences were more personal still. “I think the lack of [cinematic] stories is what was interesting to me,” she says. “I’ve felt myself change and shift so much in the last ten years. [So] it’s just working through my own issues, in the same way as when I made the movie *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl* — I felt like teenagehood was so fraught, and I needed to work through some of those issues on the screen. This movie

was doing that about this phase of life, which is also really complicated and tricky for a lot of us.”

But why *are* there so few films which seriously consider the *Nightbitch* stage of life with any sensitivity or nuance, let alone the humour and mild body horror that Adams’ performance brings? Heller guesses some of this is down to boring old sexism — both the institutional and the internalised kinds: “I do think there’s a self-consciousness about mothers’ stories not being worthy of movies. We tend to think, ‘Does anybody care?’”

And that’s not unique to this project, either. “Almost everything I’ve ever written or wanted to make has had some version of people saying, ‘But why would men care about this? What’s the male entry point?’ And with this movie, when people asked me that specific thing, my response was, ‘Why does that matter?’ Every movie has been made for men, forever. Nobody’s ever asked how women are going to relate to *Iron Man*.”



AS ADAMS POINTS OUT, *NIGHTBITCH* DOES have wider resonance: “It wasn’t just the mothering; it was the identity shift. This story is an allegory for the identity shifts that we go through at different moments of our life.”

That might be puberty or parenthood. Or it might be a life change less considered by medical science. One of the most significant differences





Clockwise from left: Mother (Amy Adams) gets to know a couple of four-legged friends; Husband (Scoot McNairy), Mother and son play happy families; Director Marielle Heller on set; Women talking; Leader of the pack — Mother's mutt waits patiently; Mother gets creative.



and the absurdity of the question: *of course* Amy Adams will continue to play whatever roles she wants to; she's Amy Adams. Smoulder deactivated, she continues.

"Oh well, I turned 50 this year. I feel very empowered by that age, so I didn't have a lot of trepidation about taking on the role. I've never been particularly... erm... attached to my youth. There are things I will mourn, but what I've gained is so much more valuable to me. I mean, I think there are conversations still to be had about how we view women ageing in society, but I feel like women are talking about it now, and supporting each other, and I hope that continues."

To that end, *Nightbitch* includes the familiar movie trope of a middle-aged woman examining her body in the mirror. Only,

instead of being dismayed at the changes she sees — in this case two extra rows of feeding teats and the beginnings of a tail — Adams' character's expression reads closer to wry amusement. "Let me explain," says Adams, clearly still amused. "The worst and best gift someone ever gave me was a magnifying mirror. So I have had those moments where you're looking in the mirror like, 'What the hell is *that*? I don't know if anyone needs to see their face that up-close. But in my family we have a lot of amusement around natural bodies. Like, they're beautiful *and* they're funny. Funny things happen! Like hairs sprouting in weird places, seemingly overnight."

Which brings her to her real point: "I feel weird confessing this... but the hairs [on the chin in the movie] are my own. I went to Mari and said, 'Look I have the ability to grow this stuff. How do you think we should do it?'" Heller was all-in for the practical-effects option: "We did try a few prosthetic hairs but" — as with the stood-down body double — "they didn't look nearly as good."

It's impressive: a fearless movie star who was ready for her close-up in the most meaningful way. But Amy Adams is not having any of that. She regards *Empire* with a sceptical smile for a moment, then shrugs off the praise, before saying brightly: "I know I'm gonna regret telling you that, but... Well, y'know... It's true!"

That's Big Dog Energy. 🐕

NIGHTBITCH IS IN CINEMAS FROM 6 DECEMBER



between Heller's film and Yoder's novel is that in the original, Adams' character's own mother is still alive. On screen, however, she's mourning that loss at the same time as working out how to be a mother herself. "It happens at different times in everybody's lives, but most people will experience the loss of a parent and that can also be a really transformative time," says Heller. "We don't think about comings-of-age or identity shifts as happening in later life, but they do."

Part of the director's mission, she continues, was to externalise these often internal struggles. "I remember re-emerging into the world after having a kid, and I was so in my head, I felt like, 'Can people even hear me talking? Maybe I don't exist anymore.'" That feeling of invisibility is also

associated with another time of life: "It made me think back to my movie, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, in that when I researched [Melissa McCarthy's character] Lee Israel, I realised she never would have gotten away with her crimes, had she not been an older woman who people ignored."

Speaking of older women, Hollywood is notoriously harsh on actresses over 40. Was Adams not a teensy bit concerned about outing herself as such, by playing this role? What if describing herself on screen as "just this sagging mom" meant she would never again be seriously considered for an *American Hustle*-esque sexy-vixen role? Adams answers this by switching on an impeccable "sexy-vixen" smoulder, which functions to demonstrate both her comic timing



SPICE

A SISTERHOOD OF MYSTICAL NUNS TAKE CENTRE STAGE IN HBO SERIES **DUNE: PROPHECY**, A STORY EXPLORING THE SHADIEST CORNERS OF AN EPIC GALAXY. BUT GETTING IT MADE PROVED A SAGA IN ITSELF

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

GIRLS



Here: Empress
Natalya (Jodhi May)
and Emperor
Javicco Corrino
(Mark Strong) hold
court. **Below:**
A sombre Valya
Harkonnen
(Emily Watson).



IT ALL BEGAN WITH FRANK HERBERT'S AUNTS.

Ten of them, on his mother's side. They were Irish Catholic, and insisted that young Frank, during his childhood in the 1920s and '30s, be raised in their faith and educated as a Jesuit, despite his agnostic father's objections. Years later, after achieving literary fame for his grand sci-fi epic *Dune*, Herbert would reflect on their familial coup as an "attempted brainwashing".

They made a profound impression on him, those formidable aunts. He would recast them as the most powerful women in the universe: the mysterious, cloistered and exclusively feminine power behind his distant-future universe's throne. The Bene Gesserit Sisterhood. Women with the ability to detect lies, manipulate bloodlines and dominate minds. As Herbert's son, Brian, noted in his biography of his father,

"It is no accident that the pronunciations of 'Gesserit' and 'Jesuit' are similar."

Yet for all their significance to the plot of *Dune*, a story defined by Herbert's inherent distrust of religion, the Bene Gesserit reside at the shadowy fringes of Paul Atreides' apparently heroic ascension — whether you're reading the 1965 novel or watching Denis Villeneuve's sublimely executed two-part (and counting) adaptation. But that is about to change. Frank Herbert's aunts, so to speak, are taking centre stage.

Getting them there, however, has not been easy. To quote Emily Watson, who anchors *Dune: Prophecy*'s cast in the central role of Valya Harkonnen, "It's all been a bit of a saga."

The idea of dedicating a TV series to the rise of Herbert's black-robed, mind-melting nuns goes back to before even Villeneuve's first *Dune* movie. In June 2019, Legendary Television and Warner Bros. announced that Villeneuve would be directing the pilot for the show, then titled 'Dune: The Sisterhood', as well as the big-screen adaptation, with *Dune* co-writer Jon Spaihts showrunning. "The Bene Gesserit have always been fascinating to me," said Villeneuve. "Focusing a series on that powerful order of women seemed not only relevant and inspiring but a dynamic setting for a television series."

However, like the best-laid plans of certain interplanetary noble houses, things started to fall apart. Both Villeneuve and Spaihts — along





Top to bottom: Tula Harkonnen (Olivia Williams) puts Theodosia (Jade Anouka) through her paces; The Reverend Mother Kasha (Jihae); Javikko faces Duke Richese (Brendan Cowell).



with co-showrunner Dana Calvo (brought in after there was criticism of the lack of female creative-team voices) — departed the project, handing it over to Diane Ademu-John to develop while they got on with the movies. Then, in early 2023, Ademu-John left, too, handing the reins to her recently appointed co-showrunner Alison Schapker, a veteran of *Lost*, *Alias*, *Fringe* and, most recently, the final season of *Westworld*. (One of her *Fringe* episodes, appropriately enough, involved someone imbibing a brain-

boosting drug, not entirely unlike *Dune*'s cosmic mind-expander, the spice Melange.)

Soon after, there was more drama, disaster striking like a massive-mouthed worm-thing. The pilot episode was shut down midway through production, and the show lost its lead director (*Chernobyl*'s Johan Renck) plus key cast members Shirley Henderson and Indira Varma. In an echo of *Game Of Thrones* many years before, the show went on hiatus and effectively reset.

Mark Strong, enlisted as Padishah Emperor

Javikko Corrino ("It's always great when you're asked to play the Emperor of the Universe," he smiles), was there through it all. "Yeah, I was involved in the original pilot," he confirms. When it was cancelled, "They were very frank and open with us and said, 'We're going to use this as an opportunity to make the world exactly what we want, now that we have an insight into it.' Then we went on hiatus for a while, and when we came back there were these six rather brilliant scripts."

For Schapker, it all came with the territory. "I just think a lot of these big properties take a long time to figure out," she tells *Empire*. "It's a tightrope walk, to constantly try and make every decision as smart and elegant and grounded and emotional as it can be. Sometimes you have to be in the kitchen a while. What we're doing is world-building on a massive scale, and there are so many blank pages."

Of course, though, not all of the pages are blank.

Dune: *Prophecy* is partly based on the 2012 novel *Sisterhood Of Dune*, written by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson — one of 23 books in a series that's now longer than a Shai-Hulud (for *Dune*-newbs, that's what the locals on Arrakis call sandworms). But, Schapker explains, it is not telling exactly the same story.

Valya is a young woman in *Sisterhood Of Dune*, which is set 80 years after humanity has survived a devastating war against "thinking machines" (you know, the kind that used to give James Cameron nightmares). Part of the show's timeline is based in this era, with Jessica Barden (*The End Of The F***ing World*) playing Valya, determined to overcome factionalism in the Sisterhood, notably not yet named the Bene Gesserit, and deal with a prophecy of humanity's devastation. But the majority of the action is set three decades later, after Valya — now portrayed by two-time Oscar-nominee Watson — has risen to become Mother Superior. "So we're in the novels and we're out of the novels, which is an exciting structure to be in," says Schapker. "There's room to create, but there's also a real respect for the canon."

Dune: Prophecy also shows due respect to the Villeneuve movies. While Spaihts and Villeneuve are no longer involved, the show is certainly "in the same universe", confirms executive producer Jordan Goldberg, a veteran of six Christopher Nolan productions, who came over from *Westworld* with Schapker. "We feel like we have to follow the essence of what Denis has done. He set the tone."

This is apparent from the outset; when a sandworm first appears in in Episode 1, it is clearly the same species of creature that we last saw nom-nom-ing the Imperial forces in *Dune: Part Two*. And like the movies, the show eschews vogue-ish virtual production for extensive practical set-builds. These were spread across six soundstages, even using one of the same studios as the *Dune* movies, namely Origo in

Budapest. There is no doubt that this is Villeneuve's *Dune*-iverse.

Although, Goldberg points out, the aim of the show is to reveal very different parts of that universe. "One thing that sets us apart is that we visit different planets," he says. Most of the drama is split between the Sisterhood's imposing base/school on the stormy, slatey world of Wallach IX — a notably damper environment than dusty spice world Arrakis — and the opulently cavernous Imperial palace on House Corrino home world Salusa Secundus. Plus, Goldberg says, "we get to dip our toe in Lankiveil, where the Harkonnens were banished to [after disgracing themselves during the Machine Wars], and then Caladan, where we meet the Atreides. So there's an opportunity to build out the world."

There is one other important factor that sets *Dune: Prophecy* apart from the *Dune* movies: the matter of *when*, rather than *where*. As Watson jokes, "We like to say this show is set 10,000 years BC. Meaning, 'Before Chalamet'."

Ten millennia. A hundred centuries. However you try and process it, that is a bloody long time ago — the *Dune* equivalent of our Mesolithic period, when humanity was getting into this groovy new thing called 'agriculture'. "It is hard to conceive 10,000 years," Goldberg admits. If you're wondering why the future-universe hasn't made the equivalent technological leap of the plough to the microchip, lore-keeper Schapker has the answer.

"During the Machine Wars, humans fought against computers and artificial intelligence and all the kinds of things we're rushing headlong to develop today," she explains. "*Dune* imagines what it would be like if the worst-case scenario happened and humans had to rebuild after almost coming to the brink of extinction. So technology is stagnated, computers are forbidden. You get a kind of neo-feudal-meets-sci-fi futurism that offers an incredible texture."

Despite all the world-building opportunities, it's the character-building that most fascinates Schapker. "They're just so unbelievably charismatic," she says of the Bene Gesserit. "They have so much mystique, and that makes them irresistible. They have a hand in politics. They have a hand in education. They have a hand in science. They're working to push the Imperium forward, to push humanity forward, but also to protect themselves and grow their own power. I thought it was brilliant to be starting a show exploring how they rose to power."

But, she explains, that story is entwined with the history of House Harkonnen, who have not yet devolved into the hairless, stabby tyrants we know and love/hate from the films. "It's been really fun to think about where you would begin with that family, and what seeds of the future they contain," Schapker says.

Where we begin is with two biological sisters, the aforementioned Valya and her younger sibling Tula. "Their family has lost its





Top, left to right: Sister act; Swordmaster Keiran Atreides (Chris Mason). **Above, left to right:** Sarah-Sofie Boussnina as maverick royal Princess Ynez; The Rasputin-like Desmond Hart (Travis Fimmel); A troubled Tula. **Left:** No dress-down Friday for this lot.

noble status,” says Schapker. “Valya wants to reclaim their name and stature.” But it’s unclear how much Tula will back her in this ambition. “There’s a sense of the sacrifices they have both made to get to where they are. They trust one another. But are there secrets they’re keeping? That’s something the series is going to explore.”

Watson was on board *Dune: Prophecy* even before Schapker took the helm. “When I got the call, I was intrigued,” she says. “I’d seen the [first] Villeneuve movie, which I thought was just beautifully pitched.” Then, once she learned more about the character itself, she was hooked. Watson is known for playing women who try to persevere in circumstances beyond their control, from Bess in 1996’s *Breaking The Waves* through to Aileen in 2022’s *God’s Creatures*.

Valya is quite the opposite: a woman of incredible but palpable authority.

“It was fun to play a part like this — someone who’s very powerful and manipulative,” she says. Though she refers to there being “a lot of fucked-up shit” in Valya’s past, which will explain “that moral universe where in her head she’s doing everything for the good of humankind, where the end totally justifies the means.”

After Shirley Henderson had to depart the show as Tula, Watson was relieved to hear her old Royal Shakespeare Company pal Olivia Williams was in the frame for the part. In fact, Williams recalls Watson calling her to pitch the show.

“She got me on the phone and said, ‘Olivia, this is a story about women. It’s about a sisterhood. It’s about powerful women and ruthless women and loving women and mothers and daughters and sisters and all that entails.’ Which I think is very refreshing for women of our age. I think the world has come a long way in terms of broadening casting, but to actually start a story, ‘There were two women who...’ is still an extraordinary thing.”

Both she and Watson were also impressed by the way those two women headline a strong ensemble of upcoming actors as their trainee Sisters, including Aoife Hinds, Jade Anouka and Faoileann Cunningham. “There was a sense of leading a young team,” says Watson. “They were just so fabulous, and a lot of them are right at the beginning of their careers.”

It’s not all truthsaying-training and girls’-school mind games for the Harkonnen sisters. Valya and Tula have divergent journeys over the course of these six episodes, Williams reveals. “Valya gets to go off into the different universes and kick ass. Tula is given the job to stay back and hold the fort. But that was a good journey for me: the little sister finally getting her chance to run the place.”

As you might expect from a show steeped in political intrigue (Goldberg describes the Sisterhood as “the deep state in space”), each character is defined by their relationship with power. Over on Salusa Secundus, Emperor Javicco is finding it increasingly hard to maintain his grip. “He doesn’t really possess the confidence, the bombast and the authority that you might expect,” says Strong. “He’s

manipulated on all fronts, and he’s trying to hold it together. And he has to keep the spice production flowing, which proves to be very difficult. He’s much more interesting than somebody who storms around being emperor-like. There’s a real person in there who is struggling.”

No wonder he comes to rely so heavily on mysterious soldier Desmond Hart (*Vikings*’ Travis Fimmel), survivor of 12 tours of Arrakis, who is described by Goldberg as “Rasputin-like”, and by Strong as the Emperor’s “Luca Brasi”. With Hart’s help, Javicco “gains some strength” Strong tells *Empire*. “But over the course of the season, you discover that all is not as it seems.” Power in *Dune: Prophecy* is a slippery and fickle thing.



arranging houses. Struggling sovereigns. Troubling prophecies. Shadowy Machiavellis. If these strike familiar notes to *Game Of Thrones* fans — not least from an HBO show with a big world-building budget (plus that tricky genesis) — you’re hardly the first to have noticed. “It’s about families, it’s about power,” says Strong. “Who’s in, who’s out, who’s causing the trouble? They’re similar in that sense, I think.”

Schapker has already seen *Dune: Prophecy* described as “*Game Of Thrones* in space”, and understands the comparison. Especially given, as she points out, the novel *Dune* was clearly an influence on *Thrones* creator George R.R. Martin. But if she’s feeling any sense of pressure at needing to measure up to that show’s success, she’s not showing it. While she can’t promise *Empire* Westeros-level battle scenes (the violence in *Dune: Prophecy* is “more intimate”, she says), we are assured it takes in a multitude of genres. “Along with the political intrigue, there’s a great deal of espionage,” says Goldberg. “A great deal of action and adventure. There’s a romance. And what’s really exciting to me is we also get to do a lot of horror stuff.”

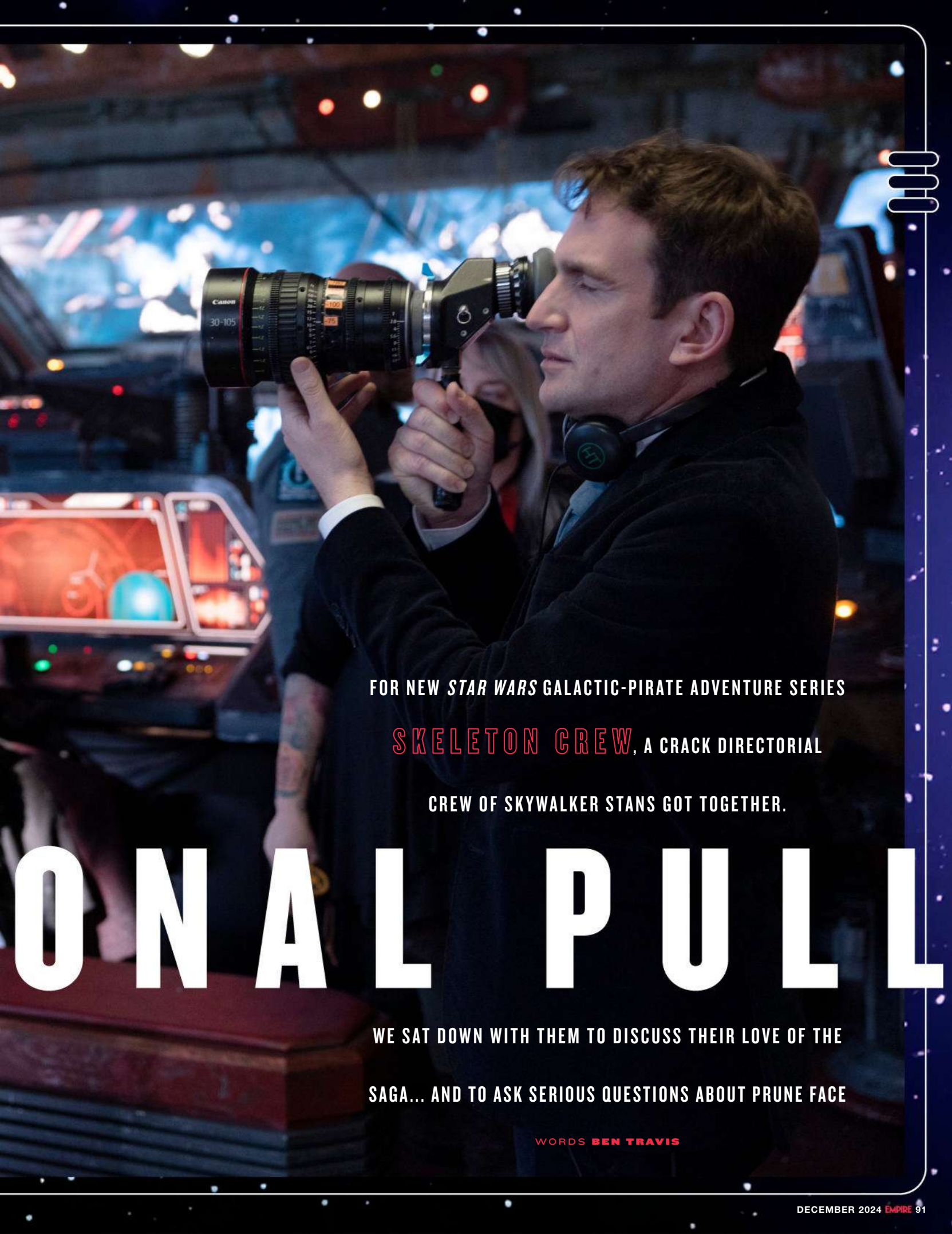
The big question is, will it share *Thrones*’ longevity? Is this the beginning of an extended *Dune*-iverse? It certainly beats *Thrones* for available literary source material. (Twenty. Three. Books.) But it doesn’t take a Bene Gesserit to realise it’s far too soon to make an accurate prediction. “Alison definitely has the most extraordinary next season ready to shoot in her head,” claims Williams. “But if you want there to be another one, you’re going to have to watch it.”

There are, insists Schapker, “big stories to be told”. However, given she is still “polishing” Season 1 when we speak, she’s more concerned with making sure *this* story is told as well as it can be. “I believe in a season having an identity, and feeling like it’s taken you to a satisfying place,” she says. “But certainly, at the same time, I’d very much love to keep going.” There are, after all, still 10,000-odd years of time and space to cross before we get to Chalameet. That’s a whole lot of aunts. 🍷

DUNE: PROPHECY IS ON SKY/NOW THIS NOVEMBER

Director Jake Schreier shoots
performance artist Mike Estes
as pirate Pax.

GRAVITATI



FOR NEW *STAR WARS* GALACTIC-PIRATE ADVENTURE SERIES

SKELETON CREW, A CRACK DIRECTORIAL

CREW OF SKYWALKER STANS GOT TOGETHER.

ON A L PULL

WE SAT DOWN WITH THEM TO DISCUSS THEIR LOVE OF THE

SAGA... AND TO ASK SERIOUS QUESTIONS ABOUT PRUNE FACE

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

IT STARTED WITH

The Simpsons. In 1996's

'Bart On The Road' (Season 7),

Bart and pals — Milhouse,

Martin and Nelson — get fake IDs,

abscond from Springfield, and

road-trip to the World's Fair Park. Their alibi? They're attending the 'National Grammar Rodeo'. On the way, everything goes wrong.

Decades later, director Jon Watts (flying high from his MCU *Spider-Man* trilogy) and regular collaborator Christopher Ford devised a *Star Wars* pitch. Codename: 'Grammar Rodeo'. The result is *Skeleton Crew* (set concurrently with *The Mandalorian* and *Ahsoka*), in which four suburban space kids — Wim (Ravi Cabot-Conyers), Fern (Ryan Kiera Armstrong), KB (Kyriana Kratter) and elephantine alien Neel (Robert Timothy Smith) — discover something mysterious in the woods, and are blasted far, far away into an Amblin-esque adventure comprising pirates, hyperspace travel, and Jude Law's mysterious Force-user, Jod Na Nawood.

To pull it all off, Watts and Ford assembled their own skeleton crew — wrangling some of Hollywood's hottest directors to get 'Grammar Rodeo' rolling: *Twisters*' Lee Isaac Chung; *The Green Knight*'s David Lowery; *Mando* alumnus Bryce Dallas Howard; *Thunderbolts** Jake Schreier; and *Everything Everywhere All At Once*'s Oscar-winning Daniels. We sat down with them all (minus Daniels) to discuss their own adventures in the *Star Wars* galaxy. Punch it!

Jon, how did *Skeleton Crew* begin?

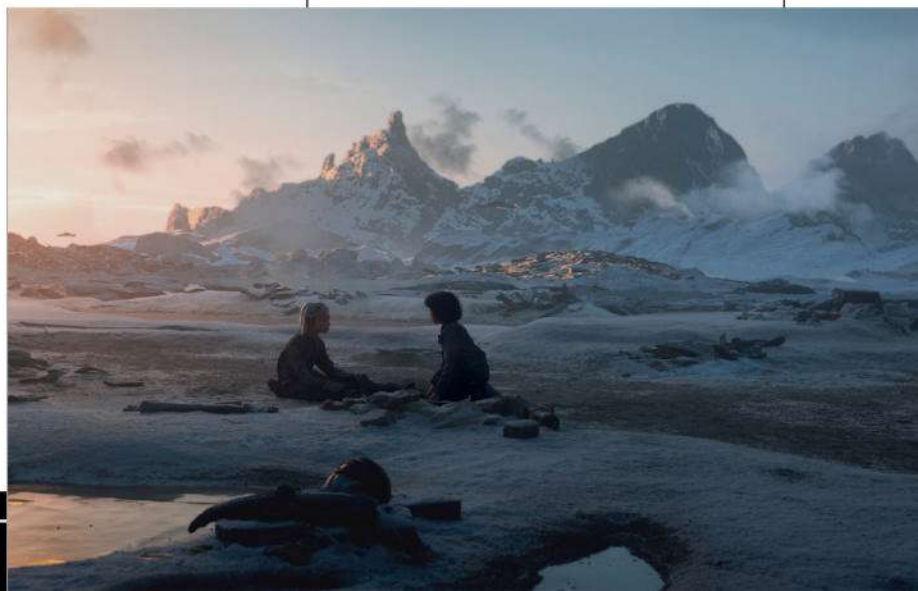
Jon Watts: Me and Chris Ford had this idea a long time ago of kids that don't really, truly understand that they're in the *Star Wars* universe, getting lost in the *Star Wars* universe, and having to get home. It wasn't until after the chaos of *Spider-Man* was wrapping up that we were able to start working on it.

How did you pick your directing team?

Watts: Ford and I sat down like, "Who are our favourite directors, who would be good at this?" We went out to all you guys, and you all said yes. No-one turned it down! "Hey, do you want to do *Star Wars*? Play around in the Volume? Do pre-vis? Meet some pirates, some puppets, hang out with Jude Law?" "Yeah, sounds great!"

David Lowery: Jon pitched it as, "Kids lost in the *Star Wars* universe. And there's a bunch of pirates." I was like, "Cool. I just finished a *Peter Pan* movie, I'm in the pirate world." You were like, "There's a robot named SM-33." I said, "Oh, 'Smee', that's very *Peter Pan*." And then: "Jude Law is going to star." I was like, "Oh! I think I just made this?" (Law played Lowery's *Captain Hook*.) To do it again in *Star Wars* was a dream come true.

Bryce Dallas Howard: I've known these guys — and Ford — for literally over 20 years. Watts has a playbill from something that I directed in college! My first time encountering 'Grammar Rodeo' was with the [Lucasfilm] pre-vis team. I was working on [*The Mandalorian*] Season 3 at the time. I was like, "How is it?" And they're like, "It's so good."



Right: Chilling out on the planet of Lanupa. **Far right:** Jod Na Nawood (Law) with Neel.



Clockwise from left: The Skeleton Crew in silhouette; Marti Matulis as Vane; Bryce Dallas Howard and Jude Law on set; School daze: the elephantine Neel (Robert Timothy Smith).



From far left to right: SM-33 (voiced by Nick Frost); Law with director David Lowery; (l-r) Lee Isaac Chung, Kyriana Kratter, Ravi Cabot-Conyers and Ryan Kiera Armstrong.



Jake Schreier: Jon and Ford were my roommates in college, so they probably were like, "I guess we know Jake. He can do one also." In freshman year at NYU, you had to do a semester of sound work. Jon and Ford's sound project was a pirate radio drama. They've been working at this for a very, very long time.

Lee Isaac Chung: Jon had talked to [Jon] Favreau about the work I did on *Mando*. On *Mandalorian*, everything's so secretive. After I say, "I'd love to do it," then [Favreau] reveals what we're doing. But the first conversation with Jon [Watts], he was immediately showing me concept art — I felt like I was looking at stuff I wasn't supposed to be seeing yet.

Watts: I was probably breaking some NDA. *Minari* [Chung's 2020 drama] is so good, and shows such an ability to work with young actors. We were so happy to have you, because we've got four ten-year-olds leading our show. We wanted directors who would be able to show *Star Wars* from a new perspective, while bringing their own unique storytelling POV. [With Daniels], we all know each other because their longtime DP, Larkin Seiple, shot a lot of things with me and Jake. *Everything Everywhere* hadn't come out yet when we got them — I was just a fan of *Swiss Army Man*, and their crazy commercials and music videos.

What was your first exposure to *Star Wars*?

Lowery: The whole reason I decided to make movies was because of *Star Wars*. I had all of the storybooks, the toys, I knew how they were made. I knew everything about them. I knew who George Lucas was. But I grew up without a television, so I didn't get to see them until my grandparents taped them. My memories of the trilogy began with *A New Hope*, but it was *A New Hope* with commercial breaks. I was completely obsessed. I still have the Darth Vader toy that I had when I was three years old that I chewed on. The head is completely chewed out.

Schreier: A programme called *NOVA* on PBS did an episode about the making of *Star Wars* that my dad thought was fascinating. So I got to see the behind-the-scenes first — all the effects and things like that.

Did making *Skeleton Crew* feel like being inside that *NOVA* episode?

Schreier: Yeah, especially having [Industrial Light & Magic legend] John Knoll there — this guy who's so connected to the early part of all of this, and still had such a childlike love for doing things practically, and using miniatures.

Watts: I was consistently star-struck by John Knoll.

Lowery: Do you remember the John Knoll sticker that was getting made? I was so excited, it just showed up on my chair. There were stickers being made all the time. It was a very sticker-heavy show.

Bryce, can you remember your first experience of *Star Wars*?

Howard: I had a behind-the-scenes glimpse

before I ever saw the movies. I grew up with George, running around Skywalker Ranch. His oldest kid is the same age as me. We were all raised together. I saw him this last weekend, I saw him this summer, he came to my wedding [in 2006]. He's like a family member. My dad [Ron Howard] met him when he was 17 years old doing *American Graffiti*. It's like us on this call, basically. I wasn't allowed to watch it right away. George would send toys every Christmas, so I was very familiar with all the figurines, the posters, the music. When you go to Skywalker Ranch, that's what you experience — it was a total blast. [Seeing the films] felt almost like watching one of my dad's movies or something. **Chung:** I grew up in Arkansas, an immigrant home, so my parents didn't know *Star Wars* very well. *Return Of The Jedi* was the first one I watched. I remember being blown away by, "What is this? Why are we in the middle of this story?" I fell in love with it.

Watts: Weirdly, we weren't a *Star Wars* family. My bigger intro to the world was through the video games, like *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter*. I was like, "Oh yeah, I'm familiar with this Darth Vader guy." Then when the Special Editions came out, there was so much about the restoration, and getting behind the hood of how movies were made. I was getting really interested in filmmaking. That part of it really drew me in.

Has your love of *Star Wars* ever seeped into a previous project?

Lowery: Definitely. My production designer, Jade [Healy], is always rolling her eyes. On the set of *The Green Knight*, I'm like, "Oh, we should shoot this the way they shot Padmé's funeral in *Episode III*." She's like, "Wait, what?" (Howard cackles) I'm like, "Oh, it was Natalie Portman's character" — before [that], she was Amidala, they had decoy characters... She gets very annoyed with me. I reference it constantly. We just made this pop-star movie [*Mother Mary*], and we were constantly talking about 'Star Wars floors'. "We need the black, shiny *Star Wars* floors!"

Watts: I think all the time about a character staring at a setting sun. That image is just *Star Wars*, always — someone longing for adventure. I think a lot, too, about the end of *Empire* as being the first movie experience where the ending was not happy, and it was unresolved. That really stuck with me like, "Oh, you can do that? That's a way to end a movie?"

Howard: From a narrative perspective, there are so many story development points that go directly back to *Star Wars*. And also the ethos that George had around the development of technology and storytelling, and the technology leading it. Personally, for me, that always really resonated. [For] our generation, technology was such a huge influence on how the stories were made, and the scope of those stories. It's influenced all of our filmmaking.

What's the greatest toy you get to play with on a *Star Wars* production?

Lowery: I was most excited about having hand

puppets on set. Watching these incredible puppeteers from Legacy Effects operate these droids. It's the most ancient technology being used with the most cutting-edge technology, simultaneously. That combination was absolutely magical. There's a character in my episode that's... Can I say what it is?

Watts: Yep.

Lowery: Teek, from [Ewok movie] *Battle Of Endor*. And it's just a little hand puppet! It's just (wiggles hand). I was like, "Is he gonna get digitally touched up, or replaced?" No, in the final episode it's just a hand puppet in the middle of this crazy Volume set. The cognitive dissonance of seeing those two things together, live in front of you, is absolutely incredible.

Schreier: There's an entire month of blocking, shooting and editing before you've ever gotten onto a real set. It's not just that you're scouting [locations] virtually — you get mo-cap actors and actually block out the scenes. That felt really new and rewarding and fun.

Howard: This is a workflow that Fav[reau] felt very strongly about from the jump on Season 1 of *Mandalorian*. From season to season, they've tweaked that process. Something new that Watts and Ford did is, they recorded all of the voices. When they were handing over the scripts and the concept art to the directors, they were also handing over a radio play of the episode. It was immensely helpful — it set the pace and the tone, and allowed us to have consistency of character.

Lowery: It was really weird to be listening to the kids or Jude give a performance, like, "Oh, it's not quite what I'm used to from hearing Jon performing every character in the scene..."

Schreier: Jon has always done this, even when he didn't have massive [budgets]. For *Cop Car*,



Here, clockwise from above: Natalie Portman as a dearly departed Padmé in *Revenge Of The Sith*; Squid Head and Max Rebo in *Return Of The Jedi*; Skeleton Crew director Jon Watts talks the cast through a scene.





Here, clockwise from main: An intergalactic road trip for the Skeleton Crew; Grogu in *The Mandalorian*; Shiny black floors, a David Lowery favourite, as the Emperor arrives in *Return Of The Jedi*; Twin suns in *A New Hope*.



Alamy, Disney, Lucasfilm

his \$800,000 movie, [he] used [pre-vis tool] FrameForge, his voices. It's very fun to see him be given the tools to do it at this much fancier level.

Watts: I don't think you would have anticipated that there's one alien character that, in my mind, has a Katharine Hepburn mid-Atlantic accent. "Oh, hello! How are youuu?" That's not necessarily clear unless you listen to my radio-play version.

How would you tease your *Skeleton Crew* episode in a single word?

Watts: I'll start: "beginning", and "end". I did the first one and the last one.

Lowery: I teased it already: "Puppets".

Howard: "Friendship".

Chung: Oh shoot. This is hard! "It gets real." "Things get real."

Howard: That's three words, Isaac!

Chung: Sorry! Just, "real".

Schreier: I guess I'll say, "booby-traps".

What's your favourite *Star Wars* creature? And did you get to use it in your episode?

Watts: I'm a big fan of Teek, so you'll see.

Lowery: I'm feeling like a bad *Star Wars* fan, because I just bought a vintage, in-the-package 'Prune Face' toy, and I'm like, "Wait, what was his species?" I'm terrible. I'm a failure. I should log off right now.

Chung: Jon, what creature is Neel? I liked working with him.

Watts: He's technically a new alien.

So not, as rumoured, the same species as *Return Of The Jedi's* Max Rebo?

Watts: Well, that's a whole debate I'm not going

to get into right now. (Laughs) The question with Ortolans is, is Max Rebo playing [his keyboard] with his feet, or with his arms? Neel is an elephant-like species, but there are many in the *Star Wars* universe.

Howard: It's tough to have any other favourite creature when you've worked with Grogu. They're not creatures, but I love getting to interact with droids. Without spoilers, there's a really, really cool creature situation in my episode that was very, very, very, very, very exciting. I was super-obsessed with it, and everybody knew it. [Stop-motion genius] Phil Tippett got involved. Anything he's involved with is exciting.

Schreier: I was an Ewok kid, but that probably makes me very basic.

David, have you narrowed yours down?

Lowery: I loved the characters who were vaguely visible in Jabba's Palace, but [still] got action figures. 'Prune Face' — in the Rebel briefing room — was the name on the action figure, but their species was a Dressellian. I also loved Amanaman — do you remember that guy? This ten-foot-tall yellow character who's barely in [*Return Of The Jedi*]. You really have to squint to see him. That's one of the mint-in-package action figures I've been trying to track down, to complete my collection.

If you could pick another filmmaker whose *Star Wars* you'd like to see, who would that be?

Watts: Francis Ford Coppola.

Lowery: I just saw *Megalopolis*, and it reminded me of *The Phantom Menace* in a lot of cool ways.

Watts: Lars von Trier's *Star Wars* would be good. I'd like to see a Safdie Brothers *Star Wars*.

Lowery: I'm glad it didn't get made, but I would love to have seen David Lynch's *Return Of The Jedi*.

Howard: If we're just dreaming, dreaming, dreaming... Frank Capra. Because there's so much art and humanity. I like all the feels. In terms of a modern filmmaker, Janicza Bravo [*Zola*]. She's a [*Star Wars*] fan.

Chung: With [*Skeleton Crew*], we talked about Amblin a lot, so I was constantly wondering, "What would Spielberg do with this shot?" That'd be interesting, if he had ever done something in *Star Wars*.

Howard: Well, he kind of has, in a way. It would be great for him to do a movie, but his influence is definitely felt. All those guys would really support one another, and go into each other's editing rooms and shoot stuff. It was not so different than this generation, honestly — it was not about competition, it was about collaboration. None of us own *Star Wars*. It's a privilege to play in that sandbox. The spirit behind *Skeleton Crew* was so pure, and driven by curiosity and excitement, and taste, and professionalism. It was beautiful to be a part of that. 🍷

SKELETON CREW IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 4 DECEMBER

final cut



A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

DECEMBER 2024 | EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT

Unbridled Joy

WITH **INSIDE OUT 2**, PIXAR'S SLUMP OFFICIALLY ENDED — AND ALL-TIME RECORDS WERE SHATTERED. DIRECTOR KELSEY MANN REFLECTS ON ITS RUNAWAY SUCCESS

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

IT'S UNDENIABLE: *INSIDE Out* is emotional dynamite for audiences. Pete Docter's lauded original made \$858 million in 2015. Against all the odds, follow-up *Inside Out 2* almost doubled it, raking in more than \$1.68 billion. More importantly, it delivered a compelling continuation of young Riley's adolescence, introducing brand-new emotions in her mind — including Envy, Embarrassment and Ennui — as puberty kicks in, and social pressures cause newcomer Anxiety to overhaul her HQ.

It was a colossal hit, just when Pixar really needed one — post-pandemic, when several Pixar features debuted directly on Disney+, the likes of *Lightyear* and *Elemental* struggled to make a cinematic splash. Now, the studio boasts the highest-grossing animated film of all time. For filmmaker Kelsey Mann, it's a result beyond anything his wildest dreams — or anything Dream Productions in Riley's mind — could have conjured up...

***Inside Out 2* is the biggest film of the year so far — and the biggest animated film of all time. I can't imagine anyone but Joy being**

at your console today.

I am blown away, even hearing you say that out loud. It still feels like a dream. It's hard to make these movies. Every Pixar movie takes years, and hundreds of really talented people. I was happy to get it done. It's a little bit like taking the lessons of the movie: I can't control what people think, and how they react to it; all I can control is making the best movie I can. And then it's up to everyone else. It was freeing. I let go. To have it be so embraced and have it be so meaningful to people, I couldn't have asked for a better outcome.

There had to have been a sense of relief when those opening-weekend figures came in.

I was at Annecy in France when the movie opened. I think we nearly doubled the early projections. I don't think anybody really saw that coming, including ourselves. It's something I'll never forget. I was in Rome when we *really* knew how much it was going to do on that opening weekend worldwide. When we woke up, I had so many texts of, "Congrats!" I was like, "Oh my goodness! What happened?!"

Was there a sense of relief within Pixar? The studio really needed a big hit.

Even before the movie came out, we'd get this question. "Do you feel the pressure on it?" Not only following up a film that everyone really, really loves, but also the climate of filmmaking today. I feel like we're just rebounding from the pandemic, and theatres are trying to recover. I would always say, "Feeling pressure for anything you do at Pixar is just normal." I felt that since day one. We expect a lot out of ourselves. A lot of us are perfectionists at heart. Having a post-pandemic world [impacting movie theatres] just added to the pressure. I certainly felt that making this movie.

***Lightyear* struggled to find an audience at the box office. *Elemental* gradually picked up an audience over its theatrical**





Above: Joy (Amy Poehler) welcomes Anxiety (Maya Hawke). **Far left:** Riley (Kensington Tallman, centre) celebrates with her friends. **Left:** Writer-director Kelsey Mann.

run. What is it about *Inside Out 2* that instantly hooked people in?

I think it's a couple things. It's the love of the first film. People *really* love it. It's also pretty universal, because the movie is about our emotions, which we all have, and can relate to. Very early on, I narrowed down on telling a story about anxiety. I wanted to make sure adults can relate to it, but I also want kids — especially teenagers of today — to be able to relate to it. Before the pandemic, anxiety was on the rise in teens, especially teen girls. That's something *I* can relate to — I've never been a girl, and I was a teenager a long time ago, but I can still relate to those feelings. Before [the] pandemic, [anxiety] was already a problem. Then the pandemic happened and it became *more* of a problem, that a lot of us were dealing with. I think people were ready to deal with

that emotion [on-screen], because they've been dealing with it in their own lives.

Was there a particular scene that really made you believe, "This is going to work"?

I remember an exact moment. [It was] on the scoring stage, which is a wonderful experience. Andrea Datzman did a fantastic job with that score. They play the movie up on a big screen. You don't hear anything — it plays like a silent film, which is really what you want to do as a visual storyteller. And it was at the end of the film, when Riley's experiencing her panic attack. You can be in the booth, or you can choose to go out and be in the orchestra, but you've got to be really quiet. It's an amazing place to be. So I was out there, and I looked up on the screen, and I saw Riley experiencing her panic attack. I just felt so much emotion — so worried for her. It's an animated movie, but she felt like a *real person* going through a *real thing*. I couldn't believe that we were able to do something like this in an animated film.

Is there anything that you're surprised has really connected with people?

I always thought that the power of *Inside Out* is [to] give people a vocabulary to talk about things that are hard to talk about. Especially kids. I always wanted to expand that visual vocabulary with kids, and especially teenagers. The movie had that effect, which I was really proud of — but also it had the reverse effect, which I didn't anticipate. A lot of parents told me that it gave *them* a vocabulary to talk to their *kids*. Suddenly they were like, "Oh, is *that* what you were trying to tell me?" I can't tell you how many people have reached out to tell me exactly that.

You add to that emotional lexicon with the 'belief system' and the 'sense of self'. They feel like tools people can use going forward.

Those elements are pretty hard [to crack]. Especially the 'sense of self' — even what to call it. We made a huge list. We all know what it means and what we're talking about, but what exactly do we call it, and how does it act? How does it look? That was the hardest design challenge in the entire film. If Jason Deamer, my production designer, was here, he'd be like, "That sense of self took forever." Because it's so tied to the story. The concept of Anxiety changing who Riley is in order to gain acceptance from other people, that stayed the same. But how we do it [was] adjusted.

Pete Docter told us earlier this year that the film was quite majorly retooled at the end of 2023 — it got good test numbers, but similar to other Pixar films that hadn't succeeded in the way the studio had hoped for. How did the film change in that overhaul?

The film's always changing. You have benchmarks in terms of screenings. When we make our movies, it's typically nine screenings. Every three months, you're looking at the movie. The audience preview is one of the last screenings that you have. It was a really great screening — we got really great clarity. A good

Right: Riley pucks up.
Below: Nostalgia (June Squibb).
Below right: Anxiety takes over Riley's mind console, with repercussions for the emotion gang. **Middle:** Embarrassment (Paul Walter Hauser) does his thing.
Bottom: Anxiety concept art.



Disney, Imago

“Parents tell us these films help them talk to their kids.”

stories. Early on, people were asking about ‘Inside Out 3’, and we were like, “That would be fantastic, because it meant that *Inside Out 2* was a success.” Now that it is, I have no idea what the future is. One thing I am excited about is that [the announcement of Disney+ series] *Dream Productions* is now out there. That’s an extension of Riley’s story.

How involved are you on that one?

We stayed in contact with them, but [Pixar] wanted me to just worry about *Inside Out 2*. We would constantly talk to each other. We had to create two [projects] that needed to talk to one another, which had never been done at Pixar. We needed to share assets. [The *Inside Out 2* team] had to make the emotions — including [remaking] the original emotions, because technology had changed so much that they had to start from scratch to create Joy, for instance. So we created Joy, and then they could use Joy. Because [*Dream Productions*] is out in the mind-world, they’re creating a lot of the mind-world citizens. The mind-beans, we call them. And then we used those. *WALL•E* and *Up* aren’t designed to talk to one another, because they’re two individual movies. [This] felt like the first time we’d ever done anything similar to, like, the Marvel Cinematic Universe — multiple things happening in this world.

As far as an ‘Inside Out 3’, we haven’t had any talks. Mainly because the movie came out, and I took a break. (*Laughs*) But there are so many great ideas that we weren’t able to get into this film, or the original. I really hope those ideas have a home one day.

What does this success mean for Pixar?

There are lots of sequels coming up — *Toy Story 5*, *Incredibles 3*. There are originals too: *Win Or Lose*, *Hoppers*, *Elio*. Where does this take the future of Pixar?

We’re always trying to find a balance. I have to think about what you know about... Your number of originals and sequels is different than the number in my head! Because I know everything that we’re doing. But we’re always trying to find the right balance. With everything — sequel or not — it’s all about making a great movie. So, what does the film’s success mean to the studio? Everyone’s just excited. We’re all filled with joy with the world’s reception to it. It’s what we all hope for. You want to do something to make this world a little bit better. I think that’s the part that we feel most proud of.

INSIDE OUT 2 IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+.



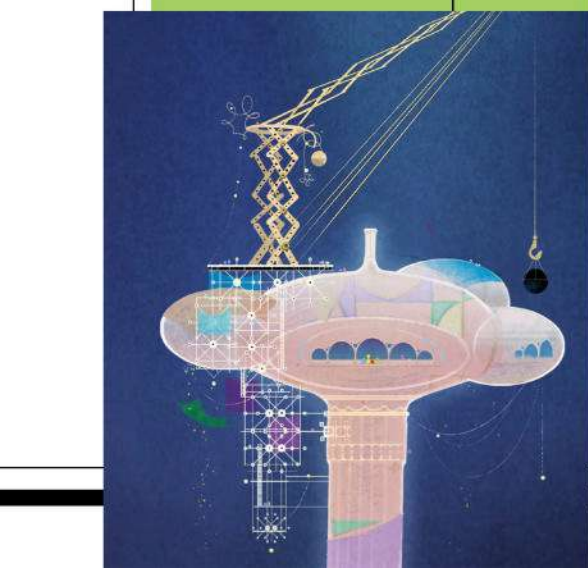
Above: A bedazzled Joy, in concept-art form. **Left:** Joy and Sadness, all part of Riley’s ‘sense of self’. **Below:** Illustration of Riley’s mind HQ.

screening is when you get clear notes of what to do next. That’s all you’re looking for.

I vividly remember, on the way back from the audience preview, us talking about the ending. [The audience] really liked where we went — we had the panic attack at the end. People were feeling it, but they weren’t *really* feeling it. So we wanted to boost the emotion. On the flight back, we were immediately like, “What can we do? What ideas do we have?” We talked about Joy being called to [Riley’s] console. In the first film, Joy is like, “It’s all about me! It’s all about me! Wait a minute... I need to step back, Sadness needs to step forward.” [Co-writer] Meg LeFauve and I thought very early on, “It could be cool to have Joy be the hero of this movie.” I was like, “How do I visually show that Riley’s calling Joy to the console?” Joy has little particles slowly drifting away from her body. It’s very subtle. I’m like, “Oh, those particles could be pulled towards the console — that would visually tell me that there’s this magnetic pull [of] Riley saying, ‘Come to me.’” We thought it’d be beautiful to have Sadness tell Joy: “Riley wants you.” Because she felt that feeling in the first film. She knows what that pull is. We came up with that idea on the way home.

Amy Poehler has said that if *Inside Out 2* were a hit, she would like *Seven Up*-style sequels covering Riley’s life. This has been the biggest hit. So is that something you’ve discussed?

With some sequels, when people hear you’re doing another one, I call it the ‘crossed arms’ effect. “Why are you doing that? Don’t mess with that.” I kind of expected that for *Inside Out 2*. I wanted to win those people over. I wanted to have them lower their crossed arms and say, “That’s a pretty good idea.” What I found is, I didn’t see a lot of crossed arms. People are pretty open. They’re open to doing another film. They want to make sure that we do it justice. But people are excited for seeing Riley’s life — her whole life. They want to see Riley grow up. There’s more of a lean-in attitude for further



Saturday Night drive

SNL VETERANS WILL FERRELL AND HARPER STEELE ON THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY BEHIND NEW DOC *WILL & HARPER*

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

WILL FERRELL IS not a stranger to big, bold creative swings. This is the man who, after all, made a Lifetime movie (*A Deadly Adoption*) and played it with a straight face. He made a musical comedy dedicated to the greatness of the Eurovision Song Contest. And, lest we forget, he also made *Casa De Mi Padre*, a movie entirely in the Spanish language.

The common denominator in all of these — other than ‘let’s do it because we can’ — was a writer then called Andrew Steele, whom Ferrell had met on *Saturday Night Live* when they were both newbies. They bonded right away. Then, one day in 2022, Ferrell received an email from Steele which informed him that she had transitioned to live as a woman called Harper. Ferrell sent back an email of support, one thing led to another, and about a year later the two of them found themselves driving across the States on a road trip, with a documentary crew led by director Josh Greenbaum in tow. The result, *Will & Harper*, is a love letter to friendship, learning new lessons, and second chances. “It’s funnier for me to say that I sent out the original coming-out letter and inside of Will’s head he went, ‘Kerching! I’m gonna make some sweet doc money!’” laughs Steele, she and Ferrell talking to *Empire* in a London hotel room. “He was very cautious about suggesting this idea. But we’re so comfortable together that it was very easy for me to go, ‘Well, here goes!’”

For years, Steele had taken road trips across the States, frequenting sports events, bars, and other male-coded places that she was unsure about returning to as Harper. Ferrell, who was keen to spend time with his friend and find out more about her life and history, suggested he accompany her. “I don’t want to exploit our friendship,” he says. “But maybe we could go do this together, and I can ask her questions, we could go into some of these places, and I could



kind of become her armour, in a way. Most importantly, we could just have a really fun time.”

While Ferrell and Steele had been friends for nearly 30 years, they hadn’t spent 17 days crammed inside a moving tin can, alternating between idly shooting the shit and pulling back the curtain on Steele’s new life as a trans woman, and the many miserable years she had spent hiding her true nature from her friends and family, even going so far as to buy a house in secret where, pre-transition, she could live as a woman far from prying eyes. “The car gives it a forced intimacy,” says Steele. “We’ve had many serious conversations over the years, but this was a depth that only the time and the forced nature of togetherness allows.”

Steele’s decision to do the documentary wasn’t an easy one. “It took me a while to get there,” she says. “The advantage of having Will do this with me was one, the project will get done. And two, I’m the one sort of using him to reach that audience.”

But even though Ferrell was the instigator, and producer, of the film, it wasn’t a slam-dunk for him either. A private and thoughtful man by nature, Ferrell knew that he would be opening himself up like never before. “Whenever I do a talk show, I will fall back on a bit,” he says. “That’ll eat up this much time, and I only have to be three minutes as myself. But this was gonna be 17 days as myself. But you know, in for a penny, in for a pound, and we were both going to go for it.”

Both Steele and Ferrell are laid bare in the

“The car gives it a forced intimacy, a depth.”

HARPER STEELE

film’s darkest moment, when an impromptu Ferrell decision to not only go to a Texan steakhouse but to take part in a challenge to eat a giant slab of beef in less than an hour backfires horribly, the pair finding themselves under the spotlight, in the middle of a huge room with a crowd that is not exactly friendly. The next day, Steele finds herself the victim of a social-media backlash, while a tearful Ferrell is clearly distraught at having misjudged the situation and dragged his friend into the eye of the storm. Even during our interview, which takes place over a year after Amarillo, it’s clear that it still hangs heavy on him. “Little did we know that was such a strange environment,” he says. “It did feel that the walls were closing in slightly.” At this point, Ferrell looks at Steele. “That was



Clockwise from main:
Road-tripping:
Close friends
Will Ferrell and
Harper Steele
journey into
a new phase
of their
relationship;
Ferrell in
Amarillo, clad
in his Sherlock
Holmes
costume;
Steele, Ferrell
and actor/
comedian Will
Forte give
hitchhiking the
thumbs up;
Steele and
Ferrell head
for the open
road; The
besties strike
a pose.

a bad choice, and I'm sorry, so sorry to have put you in that situation."

Steele nods. "It was like being in a fishbowl," she says. "And when you're trans, especially non-passable trans, you sometimes do feel like you're in a fishbowl just walking through the world. In that environment, you can kind of feel when you're being judged by humanity. I was being harshly judged, and I could feel it. But we went into some bars and racetracks and stuff that were just as ominous-feeling to me going in, but quite delightful coming out."

Oh, and we haven't even mentioned that Ferrell was dressed as Sherlock Holmes in Amarillo. "We would do a thing in LA where we'd meet up at bars and restaurants and wear costumes," says Ferrell, who had brought his old costume from *Holmes & Watson* with him in case such an opportunity arose on the road, clearly having forgotten that nothing good comes from him wearing that garb. "I was so excited to unveil my Sherlock Holmes costume. Maybe Sherlock Holmes brought it all on." Steele laughs in agreement. "I think so," she says. "He is the world's greatest detective, but kind of an A-hole." Ferrell, warming to the theme, makes one last, impassioned attempt to sum up the theme of *Will & Harper*. "Just hate Sherlock Holmes," he says. "Leave trans people alone. Just hate me as Sherlock Holmes." Elementary, my dear Ferrell. Elementary.

WILL & HARPER IS ON NETFLIX NOW

The Ranking

The Saw franchise

TEN FIENDISH MOVIES. FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS. WHAT WILL BE THE FINAL PART OF THEIR JIGSAW?



RUSSELL MOORCROFT

OUR CRITICS



CHRIS HEWITT

He wants to play a game. As long as it's Monopoly.



BECKY DARKE

Jigsaw is her favourite Kramer since *Seinfeld*.



MIKE MUNCE

Got a jigsaw for his birthday. Too scared to open it.



CATHERINE BRAY

Watches *Saw* every Christmas Day. Plenty of carving.

Chris: So, then: *Saw*. It's the 20th anniversary of *Saw*. But is the *Saw* franchise a fun, fresh take on the serial-killer genre that has produced one of the all-time great movie villains in John Kramer aka Jigsaw? Or a tired, tawdry torture-porn riff that has suffered a severe case of diminishing returns?

Becky: Can it be both?

Catherine: I love *Saw* more the worse it gets.

Mike: I find with those middle ones, I have amnesia. I cannot remember what happened in films four, five, six and seven. It's almost like watching them for the first time every time I revisit.

Catherine: I'm not really sure where the joins between films happen — they all overlap.

Chris: If you think the Marvel Cinematic Universe is complicated, this thing... my God. It's so complex. There's so many characters and storylines going on.

Catherine: Stick with me on this. It's like *The Big Sleep*. You enjoy being in the world of this multi-layered, multi-stranded narrative. It's a feature, not a bug.

Mike: It's really clever. And there's this amazing family of people that make the series as well. And they know it better than anyone, and connect the dots in a fun way.

Catherine: Kevin Greutert is the man who's been on more than any of the others. Editing the first ones, then directing *VI*, *3D* and *Saw X*.

Chris: He's a safer pair of hands than Darren Lynn

Bousman, who directed *Saws II* through *IV*. *Saw II*'s got a lot of good stuff going for it. But *IV*, for me, is the nadir of the franchise.

Mike: What defines the franchise is Darren Lynn Bousman's visual style, but I'm not a fan of it.

Becky: Hardcore fans were so cross with *Jigsaw* because it looks very glossy. I can see everything that's going on and I don't feel nauseous.

Chris: Is this franchise good? I genuinely can't tell. I enjoy the heck out of it, but I'm not sure there's a great movie there. Not even the first one, as influential and iconic as it is, is a great piece of filmmaking.

Mike: I'd say it's a great first film and a good franchise.

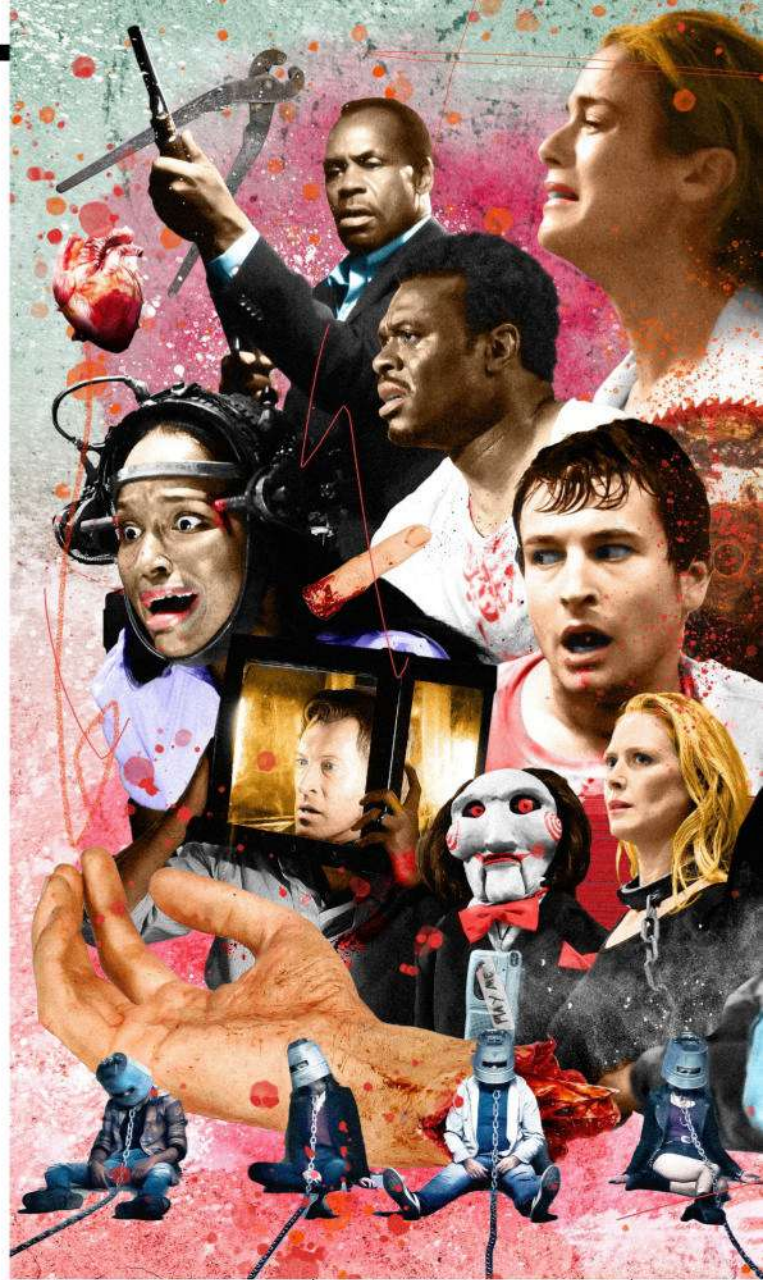
Other horror franchises have higher highs, but way lower lows. *Saw* feels consistent, tonally, visually, storywise. And I do actually think the first one is one of the best horror films of the 21st century.

Becky: I completely agree with that. The first one is a game-changing masterpiece.

Mike: And it has a genuinely good twist.

Becky: The twist in the first one is not signposted at all. You're in the headspace of Lawrence and Adam at the beginning of that film, and there's just a dead body in the middle of the floor. And every time when it turns out that it's John Kramer and he gets up, it gets me every time.

Catherine: It's wonderful. One of the things I really enjoy is luring anyone I can find who



hasn't seen it, and doesn't know about it.

Mike: On Christmas Day. It's your own kind of trap.

Catherine: If you can watch it with someone who doesn't know the twist is coming, just watch them instead of the film. The first one is brilliant. But I'm a defender of *Saw X*.

Chris: So am I. But it's an inversion of that quote from *The Dark Knight*: you either die the villain, or you live long enough to see yourself become the hero. You're rooting for him in that.

Catherine: It's a wonderful piece of storytelling. It's got Tobin Bell front and centre, showing us what a great actor he is. It's properly moving. That movie is a delight for me.

Mike: Going back to the first one, what it has that the rest of them don't is that James Wan classic-horror vibe. It has the

creepy dummy, the camera flashes, the jump scares.

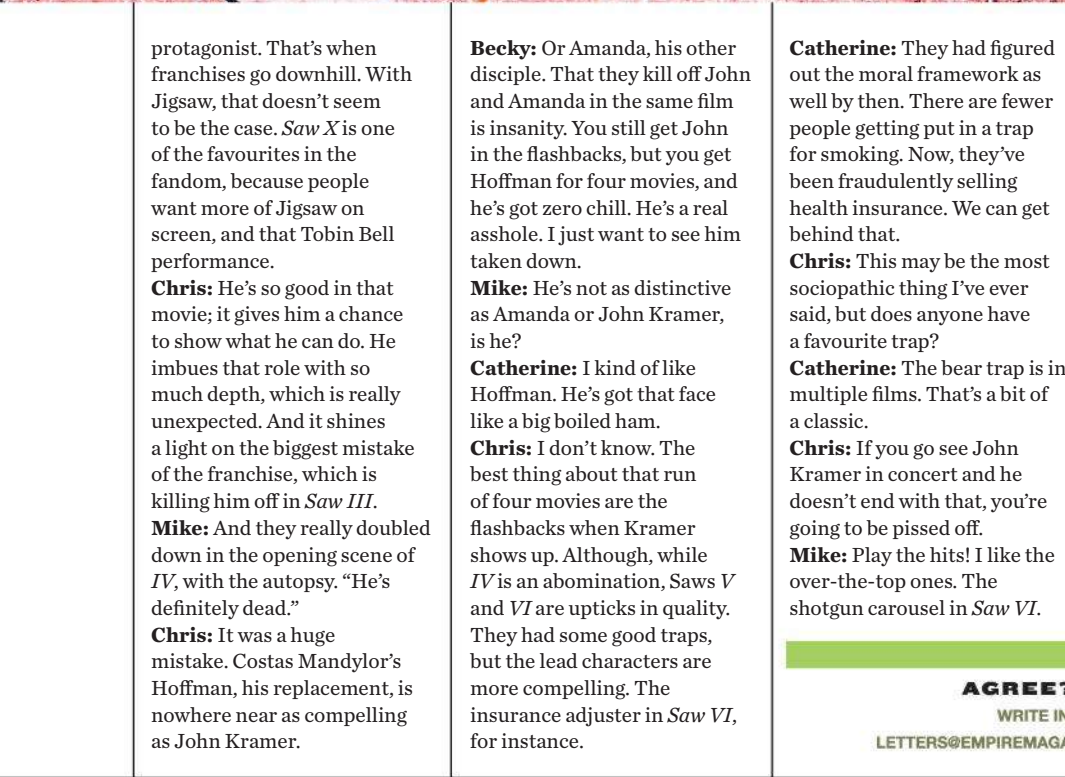
Mike: That's essentially what Wan would do for the rest of his career, right?

Catherine: I don't get scared watching *Saw* movies. That's not the point of them. They're endurance tests. It's activating the disgust emotion, rather than the terror emotion.

Chris: Hey! Jigsaw doesn't kill. I'd like to see that stand up in court. But is Jigsaw one of the great movie villains?

Catherine: Yeah. He's calm, and that's a great ingredient for a screen killer. He plans things out. That level of controlled planning is much scarier than someone coming at you with a chainsaw.

Mike: One of those things that's a no-no in most horror franchises is if you start to make the killer the main



Chris: It was a huge mistake. Costas Mandylor's Hoffman, his replacement, is nowhere near as compelling as John Kramer.

They had some good traps, but the lead characters are more compelling. The insurance adjuster in *Saw VI*, for instance.

Mike: Play the hits! I like the over-the-top ones. The shotgun carousel in *Saw VI*.

That's its biggest sin.
Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote

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**SPIRAL: FROM THE BOOK
OF SAW (2021)**

Time Capsule

Robert Englund



ARE YOU READY FOR A FREDDY SPECIAL?

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

BELIEVE IT OR not, Freddy Krueger has been haunting our dreams for 40 years, ever since Wes Craven tapped into something primal with 1984's *A Nightmare On Elm Street*. It turned the razor-fingered Freddy into an iconic movie monster, and Robert Englund, the actor who plays him, into one of horror's biggest stars. "Who'da thunk it?" laughs Englund, talking with *Empire* on Zoom. "The little movie that could. We were just hanging on by our fingernails — my extended fingernails — but we got it done." Englund has played the character in eight movies, and here he takes a little walk down Memory Elm Street.

FIGHTING NANCY A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET (1984)

"This is Heather [Langenkamp, who plays hero Nancy] and I in her bedroom, which has been violated by the presence of Freddy Krueger. I do remember not enjoying the pillow fight we had, which might also have been in this sequence, because all those terrible feathers were sticking to me, because I'm basted with Vaseline and KY Jelly. They get in your eyes and up your nose and in your mouth and everything. We did take after take of that, because [the filmmakers] loved the way it looked with the feathers floating. I do regret the feathers to this day. I hate feathers."



HE'S BEHIND YOU A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET (1984)

"That, I think, is a rehearsal still of a sequence with Amanda Wyss, who plays Tina. Finding Freddy was sort of organic. They had dime-store mirrors on set, and I was looking at myself the first week, because I knew there could be a value to Freddy's silhouette. I don't want to say that I knew it was iconic yet, but I knew it looked cool. I realised my right shoulder dropped lower than my left because of the weight of the glove, and that I looked like a gunfighter in a Western. I started to embrace that posture and work it a little bit."



DREAM LOVER? A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 2: FREDDY'S REVENGE (1985)

"This is Mark Patton, who played Jesse. We had a mutual understanding that Freddy was toying with Jesse's sexuality in this, that perhaps Jesse had a closeted impulse or was about to explore his sexuality, or was afraid or ashamed of it, and that Freddy knew that because he had invaded his subconscious. It actually got kind of sexual. Mark and I talked about this between takes. I said, 'Can I touch your mouth with the blade, make it kind of nasty and erotic?' You want to ask permission."





FREDDY ON TV A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 3: DREAM Warriors (1987)

"That's me! I'm on a ladder or something. This was a long day, and they've got silver paint on me as well as the make-up to make me look like when black-and-white TV kind of fizzles and loses its transmission. At one point, I had a line, 'Now you've made the big time, Jennifer.' And at that time NBC had a tagline, 'Welcome to primetime.' Freddy was one for throwing the culture back in people's faces, and I came up with the ad lib, 'Welcome to primetime, bitch!', which remained in the movie and, I think it's fair to say, is probably the most favourite quote in the franchise."



FREDDY'S DAD A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 5: THE DREAM CHILD (1989)

"[Special-effects wizard] David Miller came back to the franchise to do this baby, which is incredible. Occasionally I'll be at a big Comic-Con somewhere and someone will bring in one. There were several that David made for the shoot, some were animatronic and some were puppets and some were partials. They've been sold over the years to various collectors and they bring them in for me to sign. They didn't use all the stuff they shot with the baby, and that's unfortunate, because it was really a creepy kind of embryonic creation."



THIS IS ENGLAND WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE (1994)

"This is that meta, sort of deconstructed Valentine that Wes Craven created for the fans, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*. We all play ourselves. I'm playing Robert Englund, and Wes knows I collected black-and-white photography, so he's imagined me as a part-time painter living in a Spanish mansion in Pasadena — I live in a hundred-year-old beach bungalow with termites and wood rot. So this is me painting, on the phone with Heather Langenkamp. I've been very disturbed by a dream which was in the script but which we didn't film. It featured a big spider, but they didn't have enough money in the budget to do that sequence."



FREDDY'S (ALMOST) DEAD FREDDY'S DEAD: THE FINAL NIGHTMARE (1991)

"This is me getting my ass kicked by my daughter [in the film], Lisa Zane. It was always fun to play pre-burn Freddy, as I didn't have to put that damn make-up on. I dyed my hair red. I remember mostly the choreography with Lisa, because we had to be very careful. She had to look really strong, so we would sneak in little half-apple boxes so she could get purchase and height as she would lunge toward me. And it gave her a little bit of an advantage, because we were cutting some of the fight scenes from the waist up in coverage."



BURN, JASON, BURN FREDDY VS. JASON (2003)

"I see the flame bars at the edge of this set. They shot me first, and the fire was eating up the oxygen on the set. They turned the camera on Ken Kirzinger [Jason], and I remember looking at Ken as he was about to do a walk toward me — kind of John Wayne — and his shoulders began to smoke, like he had epaulets of smoke on his shoulders. I noticed the wall behind him with more fire on it than I'd seen the entire afternoon, and I finally cut. It's a rare thing when an actor cuts a scene, but I made them cut because Jason was on fire!"

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET IS OUT NOW ON 4K DIGITAL
AND 4K BLU-RAY

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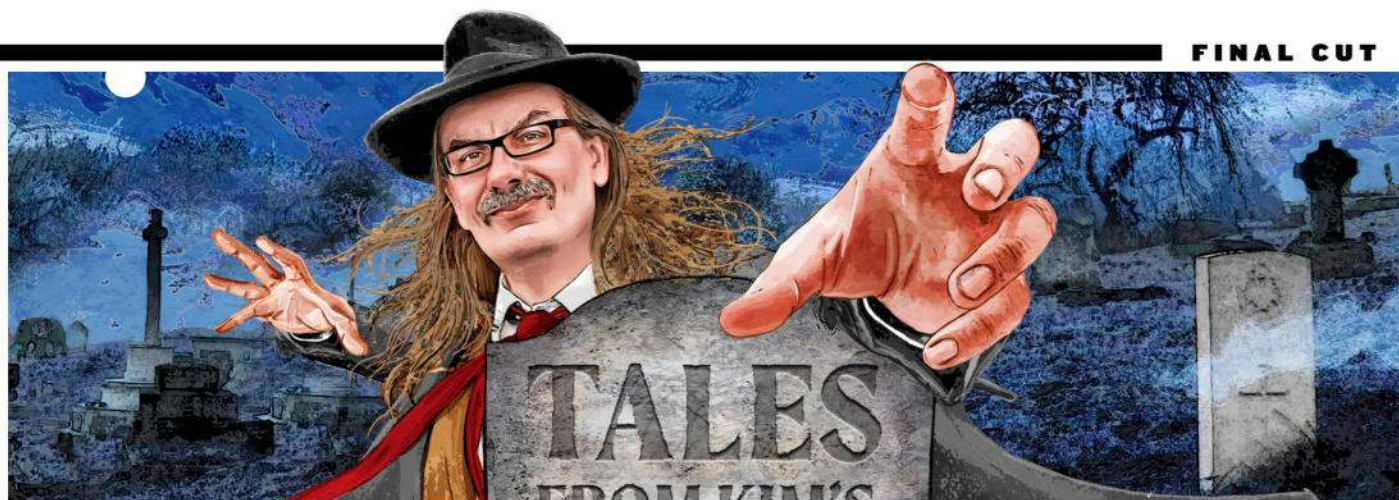
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THIS MONTH SUPPORT BRITISH INDIE HORROR!

IT'S EASY TO underestimate how many active and ingenious filmmakers there are working in Britain at the moment — often outside the conventional film industry, making low-budget, high-concept movies (often horror/suspense) with attack and attitude. They're not all great, but many are more worth your time than some highly touted BAFTA-bait pictures we could mention. Making a feature film is now within the means of almost anyone with a smartphone — so what's your excuse for not having Wolverhampton-set gangster films on your résumé? Here are six British films you can find on digital platforms if you sidestep the almighty algorithm and search smart.

Will Higo's tight, taut, single-setting suspense movie *The Group* illustrates Raymond Chandler's point about getting a story going by having a man come through a door with a gun. Set entirely in a nondescript community centre after dark, it has angry, loquacious gunman Dylan Baldwin hold a self-help group for recovering addicts hostage and force each in turn to reveal uncomfortable truths.

Graham Hughes made the promising, smart *Death Of A Vlogger* and follows up with compact, impressive, multiverse-ranging found-footage mock-doc *Hostile Dimensions*. It investigates the phenomenon of 'wolf doors', free-standing portals to other realities which include post-alien invasion wilderness and a deserted, panda-themed attraction where Post-it note "free hugs"

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC
KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS
UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER



Top to bottom: Kara (Evangelina Burton) in *The Group*;
A panda-themed attraction in *Hostile Dimensions*.

signs in many languages lead to big surprises.

Directed by James Bushe, Patrick Michael Ryder and Greig Johnson, *Lore* is an efficient British anthology movie with decent suspense, a few proper scares, monsters, gore, in-jokes, good performances and a reasonable Crypt Keeper substitute in whispery, scary-grinning Richard Brake. Four campfire tales cover a range of sub-genres: creature feature, ghost story, twisted fable with folk-horror masks, meta-slasher set in a cinema. It might spin into a franchise.

George McCluskey's low-key but chilling *The Devil Came Home* is another limited-location picture, set almost entirely in a lakeside house. Ex-soldier Greg Hobbs is possessed by an entity who has previously been Dracula's best mate and Jack The Ripper. His family, a shrink, a priest and a psychic try to help. It's a domestic drama with gothic frills.

Scott Lyus' depopulated, outdoorsy apocalypse movie *Walking Against The Rain* has an unusual hook — and, given the circumstances, a fresh, welcome attitude. Yes, civilisation has fallen, most of humanity is gone and insect/alien/demons prey on survivors... but that's no reason for Sophia Eleni not to plan a holiday with a friend. It's a Nora Ephron romcom premise set against the end of the world.

By shooting in an impressive period village in Hungary, Craig Hinde and Marc Zammit go for a comparative epic in *Witch*. This period horror involves witch trials, demonic possession, time-looping and head-lobbing in rural England in 1575, with splendid costumes, a shaky grasp of history, good performances and a plot which literally ties itself in knots.

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

FREELANCE

(DVD, BR, DIGITAL)

This feels like an '80s *Romancing The Stone* rip-off script given to director Pierre Morel (*Taken*) and overqualified stars John Cena and Alison Brie to shoot in South America as a cover for an elaborate rescue mission, with support from Christian Slater and Alice Eve. Lots of bang-bang.

I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

(DIGITAL)

A student is approached by an awkward guy who knows she needs ice cream — and has other gifts to offer. Writer-director Julia Marchese's adaptation of a Stephen King short has a gorgeous pastel '70s look which segues into the nightmarish as a meet-cute turns into horror.

LISA FRANKENSTEIN

(DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL)

Mixed-up goth teen Kathryn Newton sews bloody spare parts onto living corpse Cole Sprouse. A combination of deliriously engaging and tiresomely indulgent, this riffs on '80s items like *Dead Kids* but comes out as a hit-and-miss mash-up of *Frankenweenie* and *Nekromantik*.

THE STOLEN VALLEY

(DIGITAL)

A female-led contemporary Western with unexpected and unconvincing family secrets. Mexican-Navajo Briza Covarrubias and cowgirl troublemaker Allee Sutton Hethcoat are on the run between two sets of bad guys but have to sort out their own relationship before the final showdown.

THINE EARS SHALL BLEED

(DIGITAL)

An effective horror Western from debut writer-director Ben Bigelow. A preacher sets out in a wagon to fetch a church organ and get becalmed in a strange woodland where he interprets weird sounds as the voice of God. Others suspect a devilish influence.

Walk and stalk

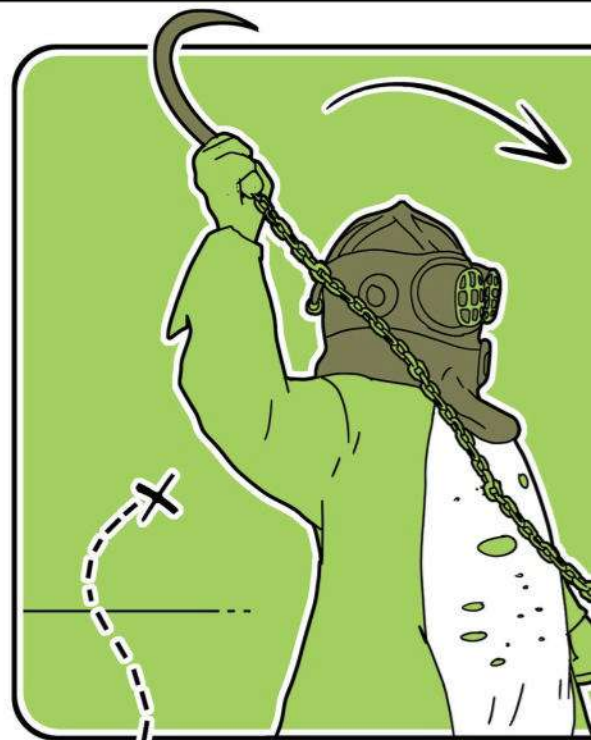
DIRECTOR CHRIS NASH ON THE EYE-CATCHING DEATHS OF IN A VIOLENT NATURE

WORDS
CHRIS HEWITT


SON OF ALAN

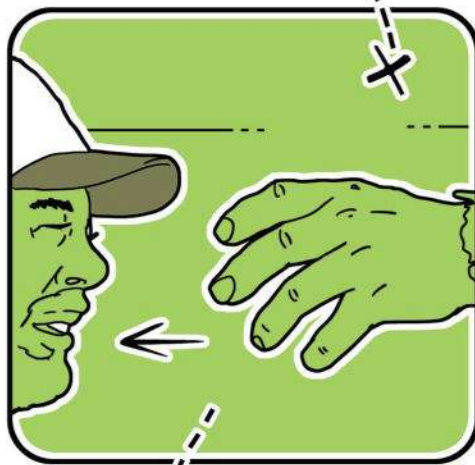
CHRIS NASH'S *IN A Violent Nature* is, for roughly 98 per cent of its running time, one of the most original and atypical horror movies in years: a take on slasher movies where we follow said slasher, resurrected rotter Johnny (Ry Barrett), as he walks, and walks, and walks some more through woods.

But it's the other two per cent — what happens when Johnny catches up with the unfortunate folk who took a locket that belonged to him, triggering his return from the grave — that earns the slasher label. And *how*, as Johnny slashes, stabs, squashes and spikes his way through everyone he meets, with a couple of all-timer executions in there for good measure. “Johnny doesn’t care about the kills,” says Nash. “He doesn’t care about the blood and guts of it.” Many do, though, so here Nash talks us through *In A Violent Nature*'s body count.



► THE RED HAND

“It appeared as a match cut in the writing process,” says Nash of the moment when Johnny commits his first murder. Nothing is seen on screen — instead, we see Johnny’s hand reaching out towards a terrified local (Timothy Paul McCarthy’s Chuck), and then there’s a sumptuous cut to Johnny’s hand, dripping red with blood, in the aftermath. Later, we glimpse Chuck’s body, including a severed arm, but it’s all very circumspect. “It was working backwards. I loved the idea of Johnny walking by some carnage he caused, and he just doesn’t pay attention to it. It was, ‘How do we establish that this death is going to happen?’, and that’s where the match cut came to be.” Take that, *Lawrence Of Arabia*.



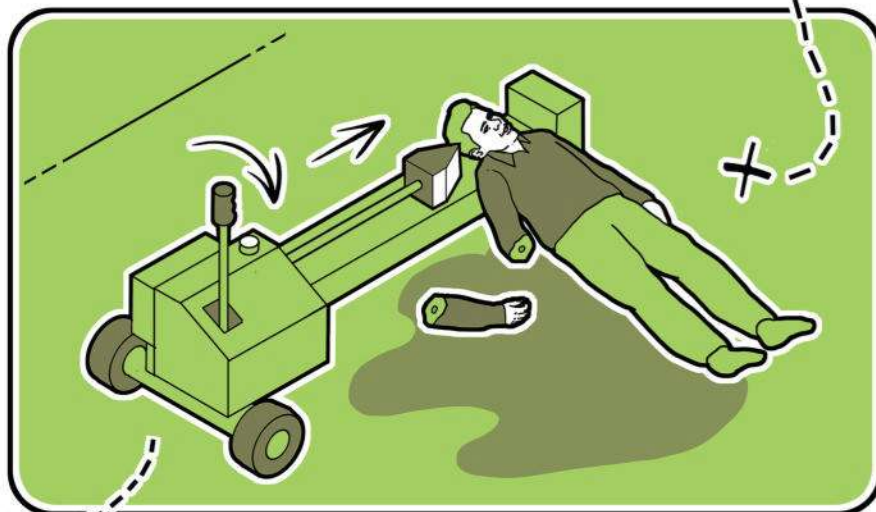
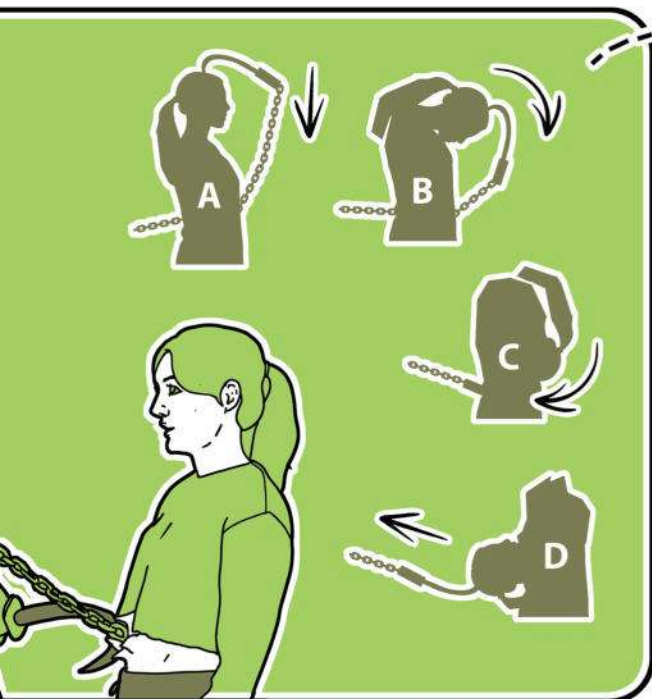
▲ THE SHOWSTOPPER

“We knew it was gonna be something that not everybody liked,” says Nash of his patient approach. “So we realised we had to give [viewers] some kills. If the kills didn’t work, then we’re dead in the water.” He over-delivers, if anything, when Johnny encounters Aurora (Charlotte Creaghan) doing yoga on a vertiginous hillside, and promptly kills her in a manner so extraordinarily over-the-top that it boggles the mind. Let’s just say it involves a hook, and Aurora’s own head being pulled through her chest, in a manner that they simply don’t recommend in yoga instruction manuals. “A lot of the inception for the deaths was, ‘If it’s something that’s familiar, whether it’s being impaled or cut, the technique to get there has to be a little different. For the yoga one, I really wanted to utilise the hooks as hooks, and not just stabbing implements.’” *Namaste*.

► THE DROWNING

Originally, Nash’s plans for Lea Rose Sebastianis’ Brodie — who is drowned by Johnny while out for a morning swim — were more complex, until budgetary restrictions bit hard. What remains is still one of the film’s most memorable murders, as we see Johnny enter the water and disappear under the surface. And then we wait, for what seems an uncomfortably long time, before he drags Brodie to a watery demise. “That scene initially was very much a show-off directing scene, where I had this incredibly complicated move happening, and the whole death takes place submerged,” admits Nash. “We had to cut everything back and have that play out in extreme wides, and the isolation of it recontextualised it in a way. That happy accident let us find the spirit of the film overall.”



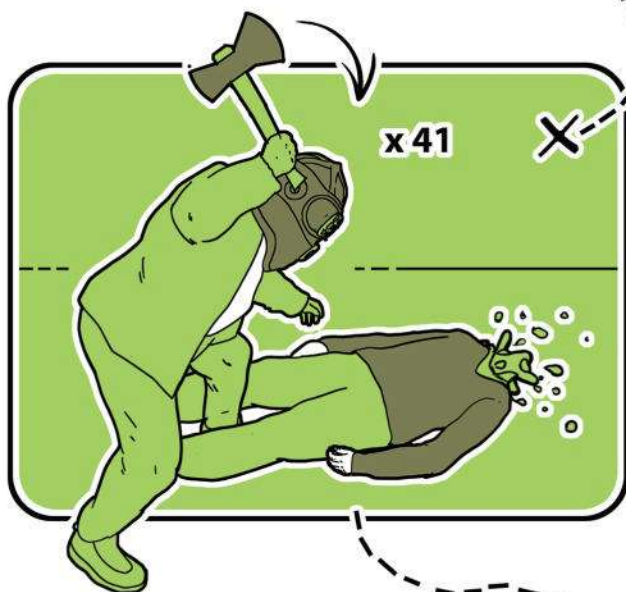


▲ THE DEPUTY

Another standout kill sees Reece Presley's the Ranger, someone who fancies himself the hero, brought down to earth in shocking fashion. Already reduced to a *Wolf Creek*-style head on a stick, the Ranger — still alive and very much aware of what's happening to him — finds himself on the business end of a log splitter that, in a single unbroken take that runs for about three minutes, robs him of his arm and then his head. "I love effects where you don't cut away," says Nash, also an accomplished prosthetics/make-up artist. "From a prosthetic standpoint it's the most challenging and one the audience doesn't expect. The dummy for the Ranger body was rigged for every limb to come off, but we ran out of time."

▲ THE REVERSE JUMP SCARE

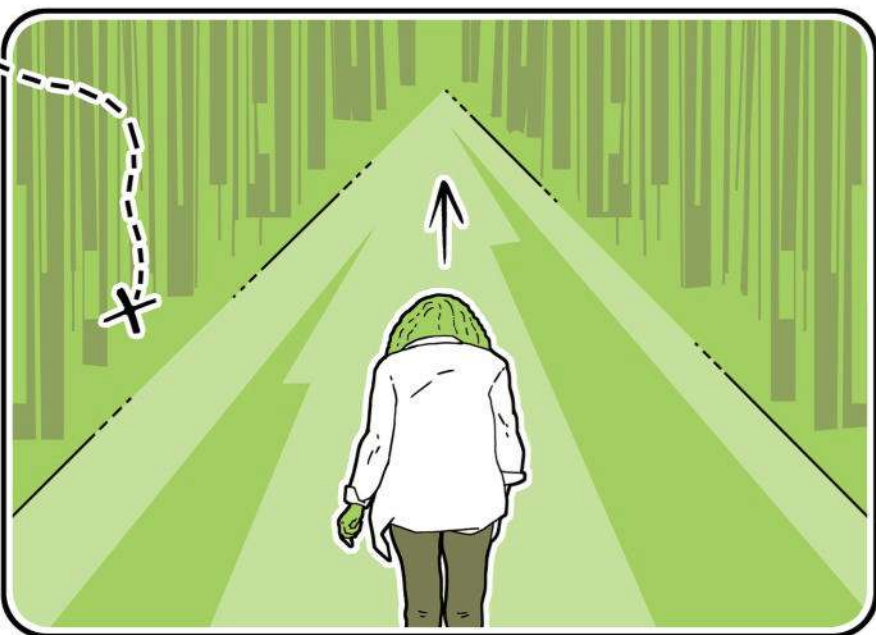
The final kill continues the subversive streak, as Cameron Love's Colt sneaks up on Johnny and scares the living bejesus out of him. Which Johnny doesn't take kindly to, reducing Colt's head to mulch in a frenzied and prolonged attack. "I always liked that reverse jump scare idea," laughs Nash, who attributes the idea to a colleague of his, Mike Hamilton. "What if there was a jump scare, but it was Johnny who got scared?" The death was the last thing Nash filmed during the main shoot. "By then I was just burned out, so it was really cathartic to have Ry just keep going. 'I'll tell you when to stop.'" Let that be a lesson to characters in a horror movie: never sneak up on the unstoppable killing machine. At least make sure you're not in bludgeoning distance.



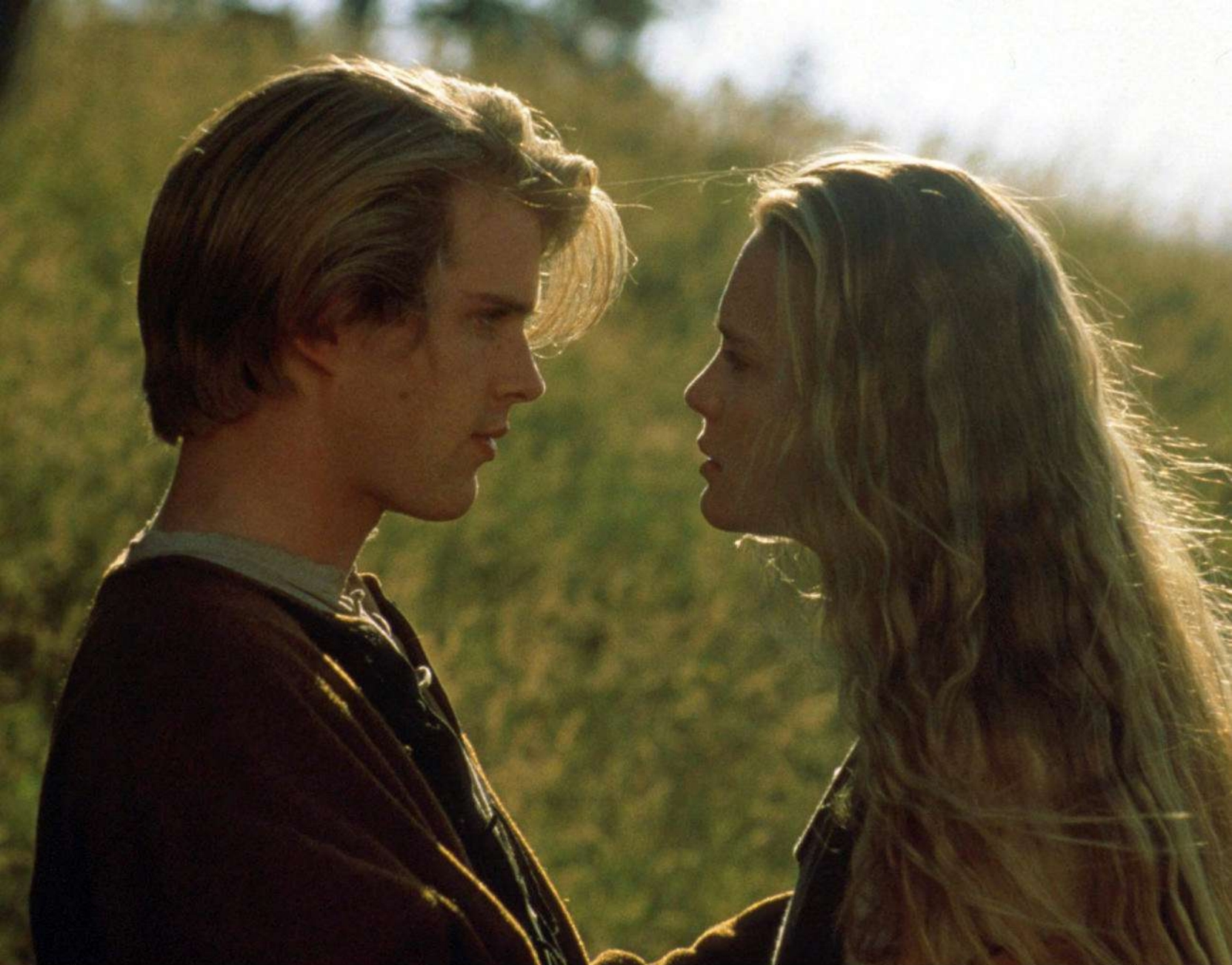
▶ THE KILL THAT ISN'T

In *A Violent Nature*'s most suspenseful moments come in the final ten minutes, when we cut from Johnny's POV to see Final Girl Kris (Andrea Pavlovic) run away through the dark forest, and a nightmarish soundscape, before being given a ride to freedom by a good Samaritan. As they drive along the country roads, the audience braces themselves for a Johnny attack that never comes (the film strongly hints that, reunited with his amulet, Johnny has returned to the grave for a nap). "The switch is really where the whole thing becomes a horror film," says Nash. "Before, we have all the elements of a horror movie, but it's only when we almost abandon those elements that it becomes a horror movie."

As for whether we'll see Johnny return, *In A Violent Nature 2* was announced back in July, but Nash says it's early days. "The sandbox is a lot bigger than we thought originally," he says. "There are a lot of different avenues we can take that could be a lot of fun." Get the Fitbit out, Johnny — it might be time to get your steps in again.



IN A VIOLENT NATURE IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL



THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

The Princess Bride

ROB REINER'S FANTASY FLICK IS A MASTERPIECE? INCONCEIVABLE!

WORDS **HELEN O'HARA**

THE '80s FANTASY boom turned out to be more of a bust. But between the twee likes of *Legend* and the overblown prog-rock knock-offs like *Krull*, there is at least one genuine treasure. Rob Reiner's *The Princess Bride* is a comic delight and a subversive fairy tale that's been much imitated (*Shrek*, *Ella Enchanted*) but never bettered. Sometimes the stars just align — or perhaps it's testament to the unstoppable power of true love.

The story is admittedly hokey. A farm girl called Buttercup (Robin Wright) agrees to marry a prince after her boyfriend, Westley (Cary Elwes), goes off to seek his fortune and is lost to pirates. Then she's kidnapped by three ne'er-do-wells at the prince's command, and rescued by a mysterious man in black — who turns out to be her long-lost fella, something he reveals by saying, "As you wish," his own personal code for "I love you." The lovers and kidnappers team up to take down the prince and save the day, before riding off into the sunset. Throw in some duels, some monsters, a giant, a little light torture and the greatest revenge mission since Captain Ahab and you're onto something; add in some self-aware sass and you have a unique sort of magic.

William Goldman's book, and the idea of

adapting it, had been around for years; Richard Lester, Robert Redford, Norman Jewison and François Truffaut are all said to have had a crack, but studios were less keen. Reiner had been given the book by his father, Carl, and loved it dearly. He pitched it numerous times, but even after *This Is Spinal Tap* and *The Sure Thing* he needed funding from Norman Lear, his former producer on sitcom *All In The Family*, to get it off the ground. Still, budget limitations ruled out much in the way of fantastical beasts or spectacular magic; they could just about cover some fight training, one or two rat costumes and a few windswept weeks in the north of England. But Reiner knew what he was doing. What his film lacked in money, it made up for in wit, and the dialogue sparkled even when the weather merely sprinkled.

What's clever about Reiner's film, and Goldman's book, is that they deconstruct their own story as it goes. Goldman claimed that his book was an adaptation — a bowdlerisation, really — of a classic of European literature, where he'd simply cut out all the boring bits: the same way that the musical *Les Misérables* became a huge sensation by leaving out Victor Hugo's long disquisitions about monastic life and the

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY NICK DE SEMLYEN



1 JUGGERNAUT

(OUT 18 NOVEMBER, BR)

Often omitted from disaster-movie best-of lists, this 1974 thriller about a bomber who's rigged an ocean liner to explode is a million times better than *Speed 2: Cruise Control*. Starring Richard Harris, Omar Sharif and Anthony Hopkins, it's 109 minutes of clammy-palmed wire-snipping and nervy phone calls; a treat for anyone who enjoys feeling stressed.

2 HÅXAN

(OUT 28 OCTOBER, BR)

The idea of watching a Scandinavian silent film about witchcraft made over a century ago may not seem hugely appealing, but stick this on this Halloween and you're unlikely to regret it. (Reece Shearsmith, for one, revisits it every year.) With its fear-drenched mood and jittery imagery, it still haunts.

3 THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

(OUT 11 NOVEMBER, BR)

And while we're on the subject of witches... I vividly remember seeing this in 1999 at a cinema in Sheffield, and coming out shaking. As a DIY nerve-frayer, it remains unsurpassed. And this anniversary re-release is stacked, with a feature-length documentary, commentaries, previously unseen deleted scenes and more.

4 THE WIZARD OF OZ

(OUT 4 NOVEMBER, 4K BR)

More witches! They really get everywhere, don't they? Just in time for *Wicked*, the original *Oz* is celebrating its 85th anniversary in sparkling 4K. It's great, it's powerful, it's got monkeys that fly. Not even *Håxan* has those.

5 PRYOR & WILDER: 1980-1991

(OUT 18 NOVEMBER, BR)

Full disclosure: I recorded a commentary for a film in this box set, *Another You*, along with Kim Newman. But don't let that put you off: it features three collaborations between the iconic funny-men (*Stir Crazy* and *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* are also included), along with a bounty of new extras. Chicken-suit-tastic.



Clockwise from main: Westley (Cary Elwes) and Buttercup (Robin Wright) meet very cute; A mysterious hero — *who* could it be?; Vizzini (Wallace Shawn) and a captive princess; Miracle Max (Billy Crystal, right) tends to Westley; Nefarious nobles Humperdinck (Chris Sarandon) and Rogen (Christopher Guest).

importance of sewers. Reiner's film achieves the same effect by having a grandfather (the great Peter Falk) turn up to read a story to his deeply sceptical grandson (Fred Savage), who jumps in to object every time that the story gets too soppy ("Is this a kissing book?"), or too slow ("Murdered by pirates is good," he concedes).

This allows the film to have its cake and eat it, to be a classic adventure yarn and also a commentary on the shortcomings and strengths of those yarns. The grandson knows all the twists and turns and sees them coming, just like we do, which allows feats of spectacular cleverness in subverting our expectations. The story's weakness, its reliance on the sort of nonsense a father might spin for his daughters as a quick bedtime tale (the origin of Goldman's book), is neutralised, and the great, fresh scenes are allowed to shine. Consider the film's battle of wits, to the death, involving two goblets, some

wine and an undetectable poison. Or think about the giant Fezzik (André The Giant) gently encouraging his opponent in a wrestling match, and apologetically trying to brain him. Or, best of all, look at the vengeance-obsessed Inigo Montoya (Mandy Patinkin) finally facing the man who killed his father on the end of a blade.

The casting was a marvel worthy of the film's medicine man, Miracle Max (Billy Crystal). Reiner found Cary Elwes, impossibly blond and handsome, and had him channel Errol Flynn with more than a dash of David Niven knowingness. Robin Wright didn't exactly have to stretch her acting muscles as the damsel in distress, but she was convincing as the most beautiful woman in the world, and in her debut film managed to sell the emotional core of love lost and found again. And the kidnappers are impeccable. Wallace Shawn is their manic leader, wildly overestimating his own cleverness; André The Giant the surprisingly gentle heart of the group; and Patinkin its furious, scene-stealing MVP. Chris Sarandon and Christopher Guest are reduced to amoral support as the bad guys; Crystal, Carol Kane and Mel Smith have near-cameos.

Reiner also invested his money wisely: on the greatest sword fight ever filmed. Its participants, Patinkin and Elwes, trained for months with *Star Wars*' Peter Diamond and the legendary Bob Anderson, who had worked with Errol Flynn and would go on to give Aragorn his moves in the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. The young fighters watched old films (*Scaramouche*, with Stewart Granger and Mel Ferrer; *Robin Hood*, with Flynn of course) and tried to match and then surpass them. When they proudly demonstrated the whole thing for Reiner just a couple of weeks before shooting, he told them he loved it but it needed to be twice as long. Back to the drawing board. Sure, from a fencing perspective, it's not terribly realistic, but it's a cinematic delight. The two combatants critique and compliment one another's training as they fence; each reveals themselves, at a crucial moment, not to be left-handed. This anti-smack talk has never been bettered.

The studio didn't have a clue how to sell this adventure-comedy-fantasy-love story, and it barely covered its costs in cinemas. But an audience sought it out, and embraced its adventure and its wordplay and the moments of soul amid the glibness. Patinkin has talked since about how finishing Inigo's revenge ("I want my father back, you son of a bitch!") made him feel, just for a moment, that he could win back his own recently deceased dad — a raw sense of loss that he channels in the scene. And in the dying seconds of the film, Columbo hits you with just one last thing. Savage's grandson asks his grandfather to come back and read the story again tomorrow, and Falk turns back with a twinkle and answers, "As you wish." It was always about true love; just not the one between Westley and Buttercup.

THE PRINCESS BRIDE IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL



The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST
YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE.
ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

TOM CRUISE



- 1** Let's start with the basics. What is Tom Cruise's full real name?
- 2** Who played Cruise's fake stunt double, Tom Crooze, in an MTV Movie Awards skit?
- 3** There have been seven *Mission: Impossible* movies, but only five directors. Name them all.
- 4** What is the highest-grossing movie of Tom Cruise's career (at the global box office)?
- 5** What is the song that Cruise's studio executive, Les Grossman, dances along to in *Tropic Thunder*?
- 6** How many Oscar nominations has Cruise garnered in his career?



7 In which movie does Cruise say the line, "No-one follows us, or I kill myself and then her!"?

8 The tagline for *Cocktail* is one for the ages. What is it?

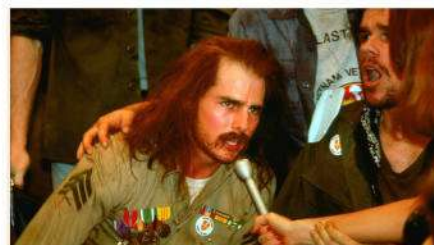
9 Cruise starred in Sydney Pollack's 1993 adaptation of the John Grisham novel, *The Firm*. What is the name of the titular firm?

10 In *Collateral*, Cruise's Vincent receives his package of orders from a character credited only as 'Airport Man'. Who plays that character?

11 Cruise made his film debut with a small part in which 1981 movie?

12 In how many films did Cruise star with Nicole Kidman?

13 In *Magnolia*, Cruise plays dating 'guru', Frank T.J. Mackey. What is the name of Mackey's seminar?



14 In which movie does Cruise die by rolling under the wheels of a passing truck?

15 Cruise made two movies with Steven Spielberg as director. What are those movies?

16 However, Spielberg also directed Cruise in a fictional film. Name it.

17 About which Cruise character is the line said, "You are hanging by a very thin thread and I dig that about you"?

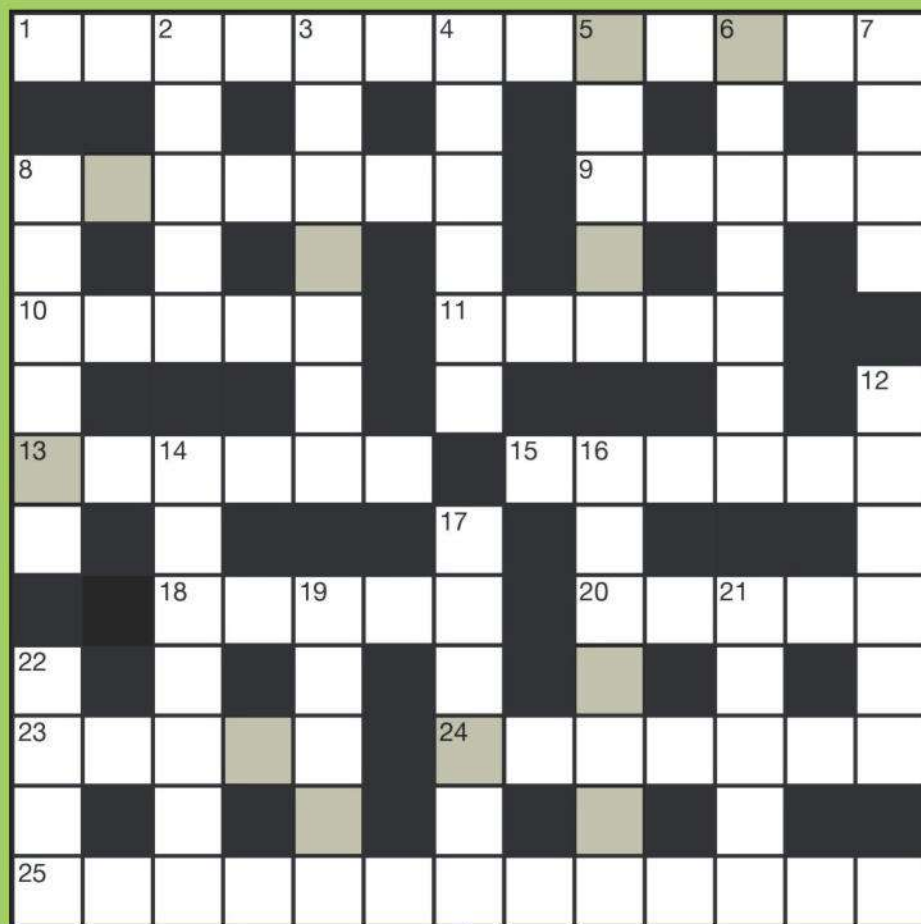
18 In *A Few Good Men*, what's the name of the Cruise character that wants the truth from Jack Nicholson?

19 Cruise memorably starred in *Born On The Fourth Of July*. But when is his actual birthday?

20 His call sign is Maverick, of course. But what is Maverick's full name?

ANSWERS Thomas Cruise Mapother IV **2** Ben Stiller **3** Brian De Palma, John Woo, J.J. Abrams, Brad Bird, Christopher McQuarrie **4** *Top Gun: Maverick*, with \$1.495 billion **5** 'Low', by Flo Rida feat. T-Pain **6** Four — two for Best Actor (*Born On The Fourth Of July*, *Jerry Maguire*), one for Best Supporting Actor (*Magnolia*), one as producer of Best Picture nominee *Top Gun: Maverick* **7** *Knight And Day* **8** "When he pours, he reigns" **9** Bend Sin, Lambert & Locke **10** Jason Statham **11** *Endless Love* **12** Three — *Days Of Thunder*, *Far And Away*, *Eyes Wide Shut* **13** Seduce And Destroy **14** *Edge Of Tomorrow* **15** *Minority Report* and *War Of The Worlds* **16** 'Austinpusssy', the film-within-a-film in *Austin Powers In Goldmember* **17** Jerry Maguire **18** Daniel Kaffee **19** July 3 **20** Pete Mitchell

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 A voice told Ray Kinsella to build it (5,2,6)
 8 Where widowed architect Sam is having trouble sleeping (7)
 9 Name of the family who adopt a bear called Paddington (5)
 10 Filmmaking brothers Anthony and Joe (5)
 11 *The Perfect* — (Drew Barrymore film) (5)
 13 Assassin played by Anne Parillaud (6)
 15 It's Gustav Graves' weapon or either ship in *Sunshine* (6)
 18 Bella Ramsey's character in *The Last Of Us* (5)
 20 He made a Subsequent Moviefilm (5)
 23 Who Ralph Fiennes plays opposite Cate Blanchett's Lucinda (5)
 24 Animal linking Colin Farrell and the forthcoming *Vengeance Most Fowl* (7)
 25 Blumhouse slasher flick in which the victim is caught in a time loop (5,5,3)

DOWN

- 2 Gareth, who directed *The Raid* (5)
 3 Kathryn Bigelow film with John Boyega (7)
 4 The connection between the Dispatch and Meg Ryan's kiss (6)
 5 Lupita Nyong'o voices a wild one (5)
 6/21 **Down** In which Mads Mikkelsen is a teacher experimenting with drink (7,5)
 7 Garth Jennings animation (4)
 8 Arnie's surname when he was Hercules in New York (6)
 12 Zawe from *The Marvels* (5)
 14 Titular band from this year's Irish hip-hop comedy (7)
 16 One belonging to Dr Caligari or, curiously, Guillermo del Toro (7)
 17 Could be Shirley, could be Juno (6)
 19 Dirty Mary's crazy lover (5)
 21 **See 6 Down**
 22 Lydia in *Beetlejuice* or Mia in *X* (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

SIX CRITERION TITLES



CELEBRATE 40 YEARS of Criterion — that's four decades of top-notch films presented in state-of-the-art restorations with fantastic extras — with 40 per cent off. To salute this milestone, we're giving away six films from the Criterion anniversary sale on Blu-ray: John Waters' *Polyester*, a satire of Douglas Sirk-style melodrama starring muse Divine; hustler drama *Midnight Cowboy*, with Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman; courtroom classic *12 Angry Men*; Japanese noodle-shop comedy *Tampopo*; Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn romcom *Charade*; and Mike Leigh's achingly sad-funny *Secrets & Lies*. To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.

THE CRITERION COLLECTION 40TH ANNIVERSARY
 SALE IS NOW HAPPENING AT HMV, AMAZON AND
 OTHER RETAILERS

COMPETITION ENDS 18 NOVEMBER

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 18 November. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

NOVEMBER'S ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Ludacris, 5 Bill, 9 Drama, 10 Lithgow, 11 Orphan, 12 Elias, 15 Mackie, 17 Stuber, 19 Alone, 20 Empire, 23 Bridges, 24 Nyman, 25 Gaga, 26 Prochnow. DOWN: 1 Lady, 2 Dead Reckoning, 3 Crash, 4 Inland, 6 Ingrid Bergman, 7 Law, 8 Street, 13 Surf, 14 Amma, 16 Ice Age, 18 Censor, 21 Panic, 22 Snow, 23 Big. **ANAGRAM** SARAH CONNOR

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 19 November or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>



CLASSIC SCENE

THE CHAIN GANG

Cool Hand Luke

CHOSEN BY **JUDE LAW**
(ACTOR)

JUDE LAW: "Paul Newman, I was very lucky to work with once. He's just a hero of mine, as a man and an actor. *Cool Hand Luke*, when he encourages the chain gang to finish their work and they go at top speed, that's just such invigorating, beautiful cinema, and very little said. And then you get this beaming smile at the end — Newman's brilliant smile, and those blue eyes."

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD — DAY

Luke (Paul Newman), Dragline (George Kennedy) and the rest of the chain gang have been tasked with sanding a road as it's tarred. It's back-breaking work that should take them all day. But Luke is attacking the work with vigour, shovelling sand quickly onto the road. Dragline notices.

DRAGLINE: Hey buddy, slow down. That's a long road.

LUKE: Yeah. Well, the man wants speed, let's just give it to him. Cram it in, break it off. Yah! Go hard! Yah!

Koko (Lou Antonio), another member of the gang, notices the uptick in speed.

KOKO: What are we racing for?

DRAGLINE: Wants speed, let's give it to him. Use that shovel like it was your spoon. Shag it, man!

The men pick up speed, calling out in exertion.

LUKE: Go, man, yah!

We see Luke running along the line, geeing up his fellow prisoners.

LUKE: Get the man, boy! Get the man!

The men work faster and faster, inspired by Luke and Dragline. Godfrey, the Walking Boss (Morgan Woodward), walks along the road, inspecting their work through his mirrored sunglasses, walking stick in hand. Dramatic music starts to play as they cover the tar with sand, working in a frenzy.

Rabbitt (Marc Cavell) brings some water to Boss Paul (Luke Askew).

BOSS PAUL: Now you tell me, Rabbitt, what's going on here?

RABBITT: I don't know, Boss. I think they're all bear-clawed.

The men continue to work at a feverish rate. Dragline and Luke are grinning as they go.

DRAGLINE: They don't know whether to smile, spit or swallow!

LUKE: Yeah, well. They've never seen a bull gang before.

More and more sand is shovelled onto the tar. The men clamour and holler, covering up the tar as fast as it can be sprayed onto the road.

Boss Godfrey, clearly unsettled, swaps his walking stick for a rifle. Cocks it. Walks up the line with it resting against his arm. We then see one of his fellow guards check their watch. Clearly, work is progressing well.

Eventually, we see the prisoners standing around, exhausted.

DRAGLINE: Where'd the road go?

LUKE: That's it. That's the end of it.

KOKO: Man, there's still daylight.

DRAGLINE: About two hours left.

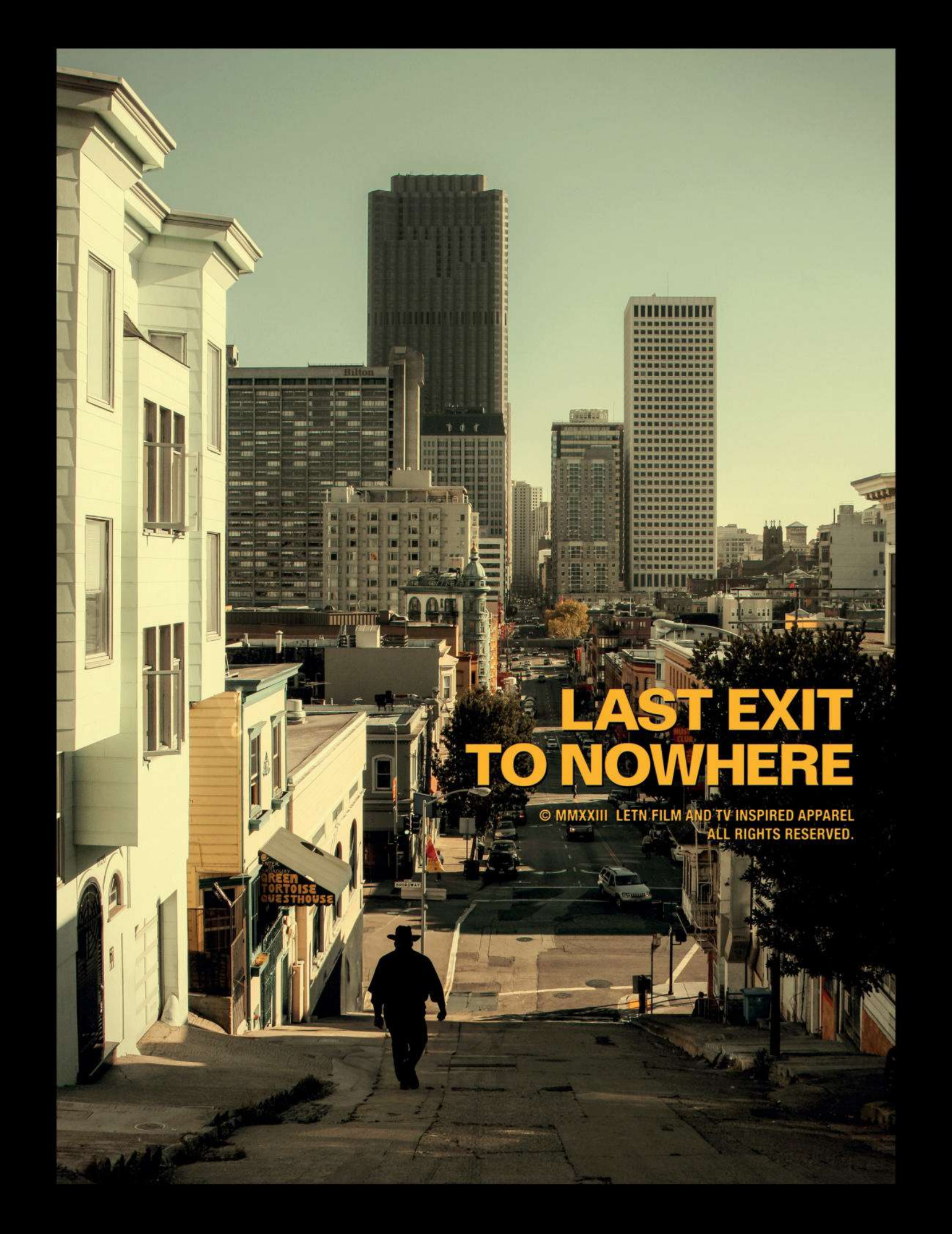
LOUDMOUTH STEVE (Robert Drivas): What do we do now?

LUKE: Nothing.

Dragline starts laughing.

DRAGLINE: Oh Luke, you wild, beautiful thing! You crazy handful of nothing!

Luke laughs merrily, rocking back on the handle of his shovel. The men join in. Luke sinks to his haunches, still laughing. As his laughter stops, we cross-fade with a close-up of Boss Godfrey and his men, looking unimpressed. The camera zooms past them to a red road sign. It says, "STOP".



LAST EXIT TO NOWHERE

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